

An Empirical Study of Online French-teaching for Listening-acquisition since COVID-19

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Abstract

The process of language learning has seen a paradigm shift in the wake of COVID-19 and afterwards. The methodology adopted for learning French which was more focused on traditional ways of learning has gravitated towards digitally advanced methods of learning. Among the four skills of language learning, listening has been impacted exponentially by introduction of various digital tools. Advent of rapid proliferation of technology has improved the language learning process, however it is not free from shortcomings. The technology-driven learning process which plays a huge role in improving listening skill has widened the digital divide and acts as an impediment for individuals who lack access to the internet. Traditional method of learning adopted limited methods to teach listening skill which deprives the students from understanding the cultural background of the language. Due to COVID-19, students have been exposed to a wide array of online resources such as online tools, podcasts and audios, which comes with several features and promotes innovative learning and holistic understanding of the language. This research paper intends to focus on the changing paradigms of French language learning process due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. It has encouraged the students and teachers to adopt innovative methods which promote self-learning of the student and develop interest in the learning process. The researcher intends to focus on the challenges and opportunities caused by the outbreak of COVID-19 with regard to French language learning, and to understand whether self-learning process using online tools and audio and videos or traditional method of teaching is more conducive for developing the listening skill in French language.

Keywords: Empirical study; French; Listening skill; Online teaching.

Introduction

Listening, as against the other three major language skills such as reading, writing and speaking, is perceived as comparatively much difficult by the

learners as well as the instructors since it involves interrelated set of sub-skills such as receiving, understanding, remembering, evaluating, and responding. But with the focus on “learner interaction” rather than on solely linguistic competence, in the 1980s with the advent of communicative language-teaching, listening started to receive more attention. However, listening is not yet fully integrated into the curriculum and needs to be given more attention in a language learning setting (Hamouda, 2012). The problems in listening were accompanied factors such as the message, the speaker, the listener, and the physical setting. Often in a foreign language classroom, there is a lack of adequate physical setting or infrastructure. This may be coupled with the time-constraint that the instructor faces: his/her allotted teaching time does not suffice for doing such exercises in real-time. The learners as well as the instructor are also faced with the problems of speech rate or speed of the delivery, new vocabulary and concept, difficulty in focusing, and physical environment.

Notwithstanding the development in the 1980s and afterwards, the field of foreign language education to this day heavily relies upon the traditional method of learning where the focus is teacher-centric, the words of the teacher- instructor occupy the majority of the class time. The classes are conducted in a pedantic way by explaining the textbook context and pronunciation, drill activities and passive practices.

Yet with the advent of technology, many instructors have adopted new methods of teaching, such as blended learning, which includes a combination of traditional and modern teaching pedagogy. Such type of learning promotes interactive learning by adopting online tools and self-study alongside face-to-face instruction. Klimova (2021) states that there has been a gradual expansion of online learning, especially due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the foreign language learning landscape has transformed immensely. In the earlier times, the process of learning was more of text-centric: - especially among the school students, the studies revolved around textbooks with no or very less exposure to the audios or videos. It mainly comprised of grammar exercises, reading and writing. Listening somehow got underrated or unexplored in the language classrooms.

The unprecedented effects of COVID-19 have affected the education industry at a massive scale. Since 2020, nearly a billion learners (almost 55.2% of learners) were affected due to lockdowns. Since lockdowns have been imposed leading to serious disruption of traditional methods of learning, there has been an urgent need to cope with the drastic transition

and to find alternative methods of learning (Basilaia et al., 2020). Most of the educational institutions have resorted to online learning which has become the panacea of teaching during the COVID-19 period. There is an exponential rise in the usage of digital tools to facilitate learning. Digital tools such as 'Lyrics-Training' where the student can choose from the list of songs and deconstruct the lyrics allows the students to choose the level of difficulty; as stated by Sevik (2012), songs play an active role in facilitating the learning of any new language. 'Listen Notes' allows the students to listen to a large collection of podcasts and permit the teachers to embed the podcast into any reading material or presentation. 'Teach-Vid' is another app that allows the students to learn from YouTube videos by adding a variety of learning activities and quizzes around them. 'Read Aloud' is another feature that allows the students to covert text to speech; 'Fluid' data has a wide collection of audio files and allows the users to listen to a specific phrase or word from the audio files; 'SpeakPipe' allows the students to create their own video files which enhances their listening and speaking skills.

Active and Passive Listening

During the time of traditional learning methods, listening was supposed to be passive in its character. In earlier times, as mentioned by Glennie (2010), the listening instruction was listening to repeat, which focused on the repetitive exercises practiced by the teacher. Then, came the question-answer comprehension approach, which focused on the class discussions. In this type of listening, the students are unable to pay attention to the speaker for a longer period of time. They often lose interest which results in lack of motivation in the learning process. There has been a paradigm shift in the process of listening instruction; earlier it used to be listening to learn which evolved to learning to listen. Listening, as we understand, is the most difficult skill to learn as it involves physiological and cognitive processes and a special focus on contextual learning. Listening instruction can be given in two ways: Vandergrift (Vandergrift & Goh, 2021) defines it as top-down approach where the learner also makes use of the background knowledge; and bottom-down approach, where students focus more on the words, sounds and phonetics and avoid the context and background knowledge. With the incorporation of audio and videos in the classrooms, students have become more attentive and focused in the language classrooms. They actively participate in the questions and try to come up with problems and solutions on their own (Yildirim, 2016).

Literature-review

The Grammar-translation method was introduced in language learning during the years 1840s and 1900s (Chang, 2011). Until 1960s, the teaching of listening skills was not considered to be a part of language learning in the classrooms. During the 1970s, listening – also known as the oral method of teaching-learning – was introduced. By the end of the 1970s and beginning of 1990s, communicative approach and actional approach started making an impact in learning of second or foreign languages. According to the actional approach, the learning of second language is an active process which allows learners to identify their interests and to think and express in an interactive way. As Tome (2011) describes in his paper technology-driven listening (in French, 'TICE') has acquired an important place in language learning but even today a flurry of problems is being faced by the learners in language classrooms (Graham et al., 2011).

As for the background of the learners that this study has taken into consideration, this

is a place where, they are mainly from Rajasthan. In this state, people have very less exposure to the foreign languages such as French. Although English is considered as a second language in the northern and north-western belt of India, people are still struggling to speak this language. People here, speak Rajasthani mostly and Hindi, a dominant dialect of India. According to Mario Tome (2016), a good system of language training becomes necessary for students to appropriate the basic skills of speaking, reading, listening and writing. The natural way of learning a language is oral communication. A child speaks by listening only. Therefore, no listening, no speaking. Hence, listening needs to be practised in schools for the students to speak in the French language (p.15).

Although listening skills have gained importance in language learning since 1990s but even today this isn't addressed properly. The factors responsible for this are: lack of adequate knowledge among the teachers, lack of motivation among the students and teachers' lack of training on how to integrate effective strategies for listening in classroom situation. Besides, the students, and the teachers are burdened with so much of syllabus to complete in less or limited number of classes that they have to leave aside good part of training of their students in listening activities. It is very difficult for the teachers to devote time to improve the listening competence of their students (Ellis, 2013).

According to CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), which provides us with the global parameters of language learning world-wide, teaching-learning of French language is divided into 4 parts, namely, listening, speaking, writing and reading. Time spent on each skill while communicating is as follows: speaking 25-30%, reading 11-16%, listening 40-50%, and writing takes around 9%. As 60% of the communication comprises of listening and the remaining 40% is divided into reading, writing and speaking, thus, it makes listening the most important skill in any foreign language teaching-learning.

Paradigm Shift from Offline to Online Teaching

Computer-based instruction is changing the pedagogical landscape in a tremendous way (Brianna et al., 2019). The advent of online education has made it possible for students to experience quality education without any restrictions, as opposed to the traditional methods of learning. There is an increased exposure to the culture of the country from where the language emanates. Foreign language students can now understand the background and social context in a better light. Due to the introduction of ubiquitous digital tools, catering to the needs of students in developing their listening and speaking skills in a foreign language (which was not in practice back in 17th and 18th century) has become possible. In this digital age, students can listen to native speakers using various applications such as Cambly, Duolingo and the like. As Fernandez & Silveyra (2010) state, the availability of web content helps in developing a strong interest in the student to learn the language. They remove the impediments in the learning process by providing a first-hand experience to the students as they get to interact with the native speakers; such exercises not only boost their confidence but also increase their drive to learn the language with great interest. There is an exponential amount of data available online on YouTube, Google and other platforms to help the student understand the language holistically (Singh & Thurman, 2019). As this generation is more inclined towards technology due to its omnipresent existence, the students feel more comfortable and interested in doing an innovative assignment using different online tools as opposed to the traditional methods of assignments such as textbook activities, reading passages from the book and drill activities, as stated by Vandergrift & Goh (2021).

Merits of Online Learning

COVID-19 has severely disrupted the traditional methods of teaching but has also opened new avenues. The pandemic has changed the face of ed-

ucation and persuaded educators across the globe to incorporate digital tools, collaborative learning, and interactive videos in their teaching pedagogy. As stated by Liu (Liu et al., 2020) the efficiency offers to the teachers to deliver the lectures with a wide variety of digital tools such as videos, podcasts and interactive presentations to promote holistic learning. Further, as Boling et al., (2012), Gyawali and Parajuli (2021) state, it allows the students to learn their lessons from any place and time: - the convenience of learning it offers has the potential to reach an extensive network of students that is not restricted by geographical boundaries. Flexibility and accessibility are other major advantages that make online learning so appealing (Boling et al., 2012). This allows the students to learn in any environment at any time and space without any barriers. Further, they can get access to a wide array of multimedia interactive content which enables innovative learning. In particular, learning a foreign language has seen a transitional shift as instructors can facilitate the learning of listening skills in an efficient manner by incorporating digital tools (Benson & Brack, 2010). Such tools provide several interesting features which promote ease of teaching, and an increased collaboration between the teachers and the students. It enhances simplified learning and increased retention of a foreign language by adopting interesting digital tools which provide an innovative learning experience at a low cost as most of the digital tools are freely available (Delogu et al., 2010). It also facilitates centralized learning where each student is benefitted equally. Digital tools such as LMS, Moodle and Google Classroom provide timely reminders, evaluation of assignments, discussion forums and sharing of interactive media to provide a wholesome learning experience to the students. Such measures have benefitted listening skill immensely as they enable the students to listen to the content through a wide variety of online tools (Hur & Suh, 2012).

Demerits of Online Learning

Milman (2014) states that there has been a proliferation of technology that has greatly influenced the learning process. In this digital society, the rapid advancement of technology has benefitted the education system at an unprecedented level, although it is not free from shortcomings. It is reported that online learning has greatly impacted the mental health of the students due to increased screen time which has shown an adverse impact on their interpersonal and social skills. Further, online learning culture has resulted in absence of personal interactions in terms of student engagement and student and teacher engagement. Cultural barrier is another serious concern encountered by the students of foreign language learning, as online learning doesn't focus on the social context and the background knowl-

edge which is imperative in learning a foreign language. Liguori and Winkler, (2020) also state that there is a lack of effective communication in foreign language online learning due to the absence of personal touch. It becomes difficult for the students to comprehend words, understand the thought pattern, body language and pronunciation which are the essential elements of learning a foreign language. According to UNICEF, *“31 percent of schoolchildren worldwide (463 million) cannot be reached by the broadcast and internet-based remote learning policies either due to the lack of necessary technological assets at home, or because they were not targeted by the adopted policies.”* Further, online learning ignores the spontaneity of the minds of the students in solving problems and speaking without hesitation as it does not happen in real-time. It also diminishes the process of developing critical thinking as they perceive the images on the screen which hinders their abstract thinking and learning capabilities in a foreign language course.

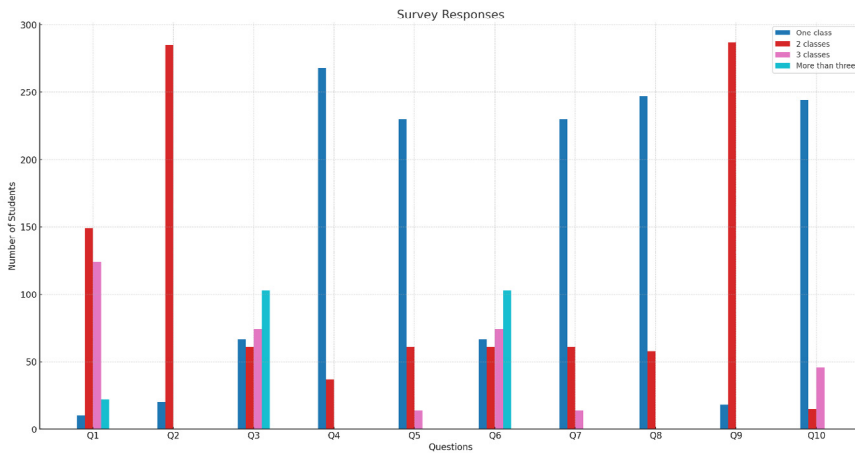
Another serious concern is the digital divide as a large section of the student population can't afford technology due to economic constraints or non-accessibility of the internet in remote areas. There is an existence of connectivity issues which hampers the learning process. Online learning also results in loss of interest in the class due to the absence of personal attention given by the teachers. Foreign language learning allows a large number of students to take classes collectively which results in poor dissemination of knowledge. It has been reported worldwide that a massive number of students have experienced issues of anxiety, depression and other mental health issues due to increased screen time. Online learning has encouraged a sedentary lifestyle which has shown adverse implications on the physical fitness of the students. Further, this promotes a culture of learning in isolation which is dangerous as it impedes the social welfare of the students. There is a communication deficit in online learning as technology prevents effective communication and discussions between the students and teachers (Gillett -Swan, 2017).

An Empirical Study

The study used a survey method to collect data from 305 middle school students learning French language. A structured questionnaire of 10 questions was administered, containing both multiple-choice and open-ended questions aimed at evaluating the students' experiences and perceptions regarding various components of French language learning, with a particular focus on listening skills. This study investigates the significance of listening skills in the acquisition of the French language among 305 middle school students from different CBSE schools in Jaipur. The focus is

on understanding the students' engagement with listening activities and its perceived impact on their language proficiency, particularly in speaking and comprehension. The questions are as follows: How many classes you attend of French language in a week, Availability of CD/DVD in the French textbook, Which component (writing, reading, speaking, listening) of French learning do the students enjoy the most, Does listening help in better speaking of French language, Was online medium of learning effective in acquiring the listening skills, Which component of French learning do they enjoy the most, Which component (out of 4) is most preferred by the students, Does listening make it easier to understand the words in French language, Do students speak French in classrooms, The medium of teaching used by the French language teacher.

Findings



The above grouped bar chart displays the responses to the 10 questions asked in questionnaire. Each group of bars represents a different question, with each bar within a group corresponding to an answer choice. The chart uses different colours to distinguish the answer choices, making it easy to compare the number of students for each response across all questions. A comprehensive empirical study was conducted via questionnaires involving 305 middle school students from CBSE schools in Jaipur, focusing on the importance of listening skills in acquiring the French language. The study revealed that most students (48.9%) attended two French classes per week, while only a small percentage (3.3%) attended just one class. It was noted that an overwhelming majority (93.4%) did not have access to a CD/DVD with their French textbooks, indicating limited availability

of audio-visual resources. When asked about their favourite component of French learning, 33.8% of the students preferred listening, followed by speaking (24.3%), reading (22.0%), and writing (20.0%). A significant 87.9% of students acknowledged that listening activities contributed to better speaking skills and had seen an exponential growth during the COVID-19 Scenario. During listening activities, 75.4% of the students reported feeling enjoyed, whereas 20.0% felt confused, and 4.6% felt bored. Furthermore, 81.0% of the students agreed that listening made it easier to understand French words because the pronunciation is very different from other languages for e.g.: words ending with letters; s, r and t, at the end, are generally not pronounced like 's' in 'Paris', 'r' in 'Parler' or 't' in 'nuit' etc. Thus, making it difficult for the students to comprehend the pronunciation of the words from the text books only. Despite the recognized benefits of listening, only 5.9% of students actively spoke French in the classroom. The medium of instruction predominantly used by teachers was English (80.0%), with only 4.9% using French and 15.1% using a mix of both languages. These findings underscore the crucial role of listening in language acquisition and highlight the need for enhanced audio-visual resources and greater use of French language in classroom instruction to foster a more immersive learning environment. The study highlights the critical role of listening skills in the acquisition of the French language among middle school students in Jaipur. Listening activities not only enhance speaking abilities but also improve overall comprehension and enjoyment of the language learning process. However, there is a need for greater integration of audio-visual aids and more frequent use of French in the classroom to create a more immersive learning environment.

Online Learning - Future of Education in India ?

The use of e- learning has accelerated due to the current crisis. There are numerous technologies being introduced to make learning smooth and accessible to all (Davidson, 2015). But the real question arises, is it accessible and affordable to all? The learning dynamics took a drastic turn due to Covid which helped in promoting continuity in the learning process; however, it does more harm than good as the online learning requires robust internet connection and continuous power supply which is a challenging task to this day. The inadequate infrastructure in the schools makes it more difficult for the students to learn the foreign language. Moreover, the curriculum design of language courses needs a major revamping to suit the e-learning. As listening component is not marked separately, less attention is paid to it. The teachers tend to avoid the listening component and it remains undeveloped. Teachers should, therefore, adopt hybrid

mode of teaching so as to bring in a rapid and more successful pedagogical transformation. Online learning caters to many benefits but is riddled with umpteen shortcomings, especially with regard to the learning format which is uniform for all students and needs more customised attention to the special needs of the students. Traditional classrooms are here to stay, but with blended teaching and curriculum review, the new paradigm can be embraced. (Oyedotun, 2020).

Conclusion

In conclusion, COVID-19 outbreak has introduced some serious challenges for school education, especially in foreign language learning. Intense lockdown and social distancing have adversely impacted the education industry. According to Brianna et al., (2019) there has been a drastic shift in the teaching pedagogy of the teachers with the adoption of more technologically advanced tools to make the classes more engaging and innovative. The sudden transition from traditional methods to online learning has improved the quality of education, especially the listening skill in French language, as students have access to a wide variety of tools such as TeachVid, Cambly, Duolingo and other tools which have given them an immense amount of flexibility, accessibility and convenience. Multimedia learning has promoted a culture of self-learning and has exposed the students to enhance their learning experience by adopting different tools available online (Broadbent & Poon, 2015). Although online learning has been beneficial in enhancing the quality of learning, it has its own set of challenges which primarily includes difficulty to adjust to the new environment by the students, teachers not being properly equipped to adopt the advanced technology, and the problem of isolated learner which has shown serious implications on the mental and physical being of the students. Increased sense of anxiety and anti-social behaviour has been observed in the students. In addition to these, there has been digital divide as large section of Indian population belongs to rural households and lacks good internet connectivity. Hence, this section is deprived of the modern teaching pedagogy (Liguori & Winkler, 2020). These challenges prove that online learning is not a viable option in the long run. The traditional methods of teaching foreign languages should persist in combination with the usage of digital tools, as blended learning is the future of education and to make the learners the best linguistics.

Suggestions

The online teaching has expanded the scope of learning by introducing

digital tools and multimedia in the foreign language course (Saxena, 2020); although, teachers still feel reluctant to adapt to the new technology. The rapid proliferation of technology has come with its own set of challenges to the teachers as they face difficulty in adopting and employing the interactive tools in their teaching pedagogy. In this digital era, it becomes crucial to understand the attitudes of the educators and encourage them to adopt the digital tools to sustain the dynamic learning environment (Gillett-Swan, 2017). Further, governments need to improve the infrastructure and facilitate the advanced learning process by improving the technological issues experienced by the rural households and spread awareness about the benefits of blended learning in foreign language classrooms. There should be more opportunities given to the instructors to adopt to new technology (Magalhães et al., 2020). The integration of effective techniques and strategies to foster the acquisition of foreign language learning such as French. The educational institutions, public or private, are bestowed with the responsibility to ensure good quality education to all, by developing capability building and innovation in the field of education so that all the stakeholders are benefitted.

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