

Student Perceptions on the Use of Zoom Technology for French Language Teaching: with Special Reference to Students in a French Language Institute

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Abstract

Conducting teaching-learning activities using online technologies such as video-conferencing applications (e.g. Zoom) has become essential in the present Sri Lankan context due to the prevalence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The objective of this study is to examine Sri Lankan students' perceptions on the use of Zoom technology for French language teaching. The study is done with twenty Sri Lankan female students whose first language is Sinhalese from the pre-intermediate level classes at the French Language Institute of Alliance Française de Kotte. The data were collected from a pre-test, a post-test and questionnaires. The method used is qualitative research where the data were analysed thematically focusing on the data driven codes. The findings of the study indicated that the majority of the students considered the use of Zoom in French language teaching is effective and efficient in terms of time and the current pandemic situation and they agreed that teaching French language via Zoom can help them in practicing language skills and acquiring new vocabularies.

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However, lack of collaboration, loss of identity, difficulty in meeting the expectations of the students, distance and technical issues are considered to be the major challenges in using Zoom technology for French language teaching. The results implied the necessity to conduct blended classes rather than using only online technologies such as video conferencing applications (e.g.- Zoom). At a time when the world is trying to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic, the study carried out is significant in developing strategies to teach French language effectively and further research can be conducted on other video conferencing applications to manage the challenges that the students face in French language teaching.

Keywords: French language teaching, COVID-19 pandemic, Zoom technology

Introduction

The online distance learning has become essential in the present day due to the COVID-19 pandemic in Sri Lanka. Hence, infusing online technologies such as video conferencing applications (e.g.- Zoom) into French language teaching has become a necessity. The classroom environment, today, is completely different from the traditional classroom. More and more French language classes are taking place online. This often offers the students to continue their French language learning despite the pandemic. The video conferencing application Zoom has helped to introduce a number of innovations into French language instruction. The widespread use of methods, activities and tools of computer assisted language teaching enable many teachers at the French language institute of Alliance Française de Kotte to enhance their teaching and maximize learning opportunities for their students.

Zoom is a cloud-based service which offers meetings and webinars and provides content sharing and video conferencing capability. It helps French language teachers of Alliance Française de Kotte to bring their students together in a frictionless environment to continue the studies. Alqahtani (2019) points out that new technologies open the doors for better distance learning programs, allowing those in disadvantaged areas to have access to the same education as the privileged. Zoom application which is usually

used for video conferences, is accessible from nearly any location with a mobile device or a laptop. In other words, information technology has widened access to education during the COVID 19 pandemic.

However, Erben, et al. (2008) remind that those who are working with new technologies need to be aware of the potential frustrations and how to avoid them. In the real practice, there are some problems and challenges found. Several researchers have also raised doubts about the effectiveness of these online learning systems. In language teaching, communicative approach which is considered as the most effective theoretical model since early 1970s demands natural language learning strategies and more open-ended types of activities, such as role-plays, information gap activities, and simulations in a communicative situation, in order to understand the potential communicative functions.

Hence, it is crucial to identify the students' perception on language learning via Zoom in order to develop strategies to teach French language effectively and to manage challenges they face. Through this study, the researcher attempts to study the perception of students on French language teaching via Zoom at the French language institute of Alliance Française de Kotte. The researcher also attempts to explore the difficulties students face when learning French language online. Therefore, the objectives of this study are to examine the students' perceptions on French language teaching through Zoom application at the French language institute of Alliance Française de Kotte and to identify the challenges faced by the students. Moreover, to examine the progress of the students and their proficiency in French language over the selected period of time, a pre-test and a post-test focusing on the four main language skills reading, writing, speaking and listening were given.

Methodology

This study was conducted as a descriptive qualitative study on the perceptions of students on conducting online French language teaching via Zoom. The data were analysed thematically focusing

on the data driven themes. The descriptive qualitative approach is used to analyse the data because through this approach the perception of the students and the experiences of individual students can be understood and examined well. The data were collected from a pre-test, a post-test and a student questionnaire. A pre-test and a post-test are done to measure the progress of the students and a student questionnaire is given to examine the perception of the students towards the Zoom sessions. The participants of this present study are limited to twenty Sri Lankan female students whose first language is Sinhala from the pre-intermediate level classes to maintain the effectiveness of the online learning process. Their ages range from 16 to 30 years. Regarding their French language learning experience, they have been learning French for two to six years. They have been familiar with computer around five to thirteen years for studying, working, and entertainment purposes.

The pre-test and the post-test are given before the online learning process started and after the online learning process finished to measure the improvement of the students in French language. At the end of the process of online teaching via Zoom, a questionnaire is given to find out their attitudes towards the Zoom sessions. The whole process of online teaching was done for three months. Through the questionnaire, a special attempt has been made to extract answers to questions on how effective the online teaching methods are compared to traditional classroom methods especially when students interact with peers and teacher. Moreover, the questionnaire was made in a manner that students' perception towards French language learning via Zoom takes primary focus. Students were asked to give their opinion when it comes to pertaining to the online method, and their feelings towards the overall effectiveness of learning French language via Zoom. They were also asked to rate the effectiveness when learning with fellow students and the teacher in a traditional class and in a purely online setting.

The data analysis was conducted based on the collected data from the questionnaire and the tests. In the pre-test and the post-test, the four main skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking were assessed to see how effectively they learn in an online setting as

compared to a classroom environment. All the qualitative data gathered from the questionnaire is divided into four main parts and analysed to examine the students' perception towards French language learning via Zoom. At the end of the research, after analysing the data, the answers to the objectives were found out.

Results and discussion

Evidence from previous studies show that the Zoom application could help students to interact directly with the teacher. However, scientific investigations could not provide significant support for examining research findings regarding student perceptions and the challenges associated with employing the Zoom application in French language teaching. Blum (2020), a professor of Anthropology at the University of Notre Dame, mentions that over her decades of teaching, she has learned to read a room well: the harmonized posture, the breaths, the laughter, the eye gaze. According to Blum, her classes are successful when everyone is so excited that they want to speak over each other out of their enthusiasm, when the affect and the cognition and the interaction work together, when a classroom aims for conversation and when all the tools of human interaction are recruited. She has thus discovered the power of anthropology in language teaching classrooms. Hence, teaching a foreign language via Zoom can be quite challenging if effective strategies are not correctly identified. In order to develop such strategies, awareness of students' perception on online French language teaching is crucial.

Based on the results of the pre-test and the post-test, the researcher could notice a progress in the students. Majority of the students got more than 65% for each language skill tested in the post-test. According to the students, it is essential and important to continue their French language learning during the pandemic via online teaching. And most of their responses towards online French language learning were positive. Students further mentioned that they could see their improvement in French language. However, the data collected from the questionnaire indicate that students face several challenges when learning French language via Zoom. Learners' issues mostly included

learners' expectations, readiness, identity, and participation in online courses. If these issues found out through this study are well addressed, a more effective online teaching process can be implemented.

Lack of collaboration and active participation on online instruction

Collaboration is an event initiated by a community of learners that usually leads to a product or culminating project. Collaboration is thus a working practice whereby individuals work together for a common purpose to achieve a benefit. When talking about collaboration, active participation of each individual is vital. The first part of this study focuses on the collaboration and the active participation of the students when learning French language via Zoom at the French language institute of Alliance Française de Kotte.

This study found that 80% of the students lack active participation and collaboration when they are in Zoom sessions. The students indicated several reasons for their lack of collaboration and active participation. 75% of the students said that the lack of instant feedback both from teacher and their fellow students is perceived as a challenge for them. It is found that low participation by members and lack of feedback both from teacher and fellow students are a major hindrance to collaborative learning. Furthermore, 70% of the students mentioned that the difficulty in representing their feelings and emotions impedes communication. 50% of them also said that the inconsistency of participants presents another barrier to effective collaboration and active participation of each individual. 30% of the students mentioned that slow internet connectivity as one of their worst experiences which could be due to low internet bandwidth.

This study took into consideration the definition offered by Dillenbourg which locates collaborative learning as a situation in which two or more people learn or attempt to learn something together. The situation is termed collaborative if peers are at the same level, can perform the same actions, have a common goal and work together (Dillenbourg, 1999). In the pedagogy of teaching,

teachers are encouraged to assign group work that gives students the freedom to learn from one another. The idea of group work in learning finds its root in work from the Russian psychologist, Vygotsky who explored the causal relationships that exist between social interaction and individual learning providing a foundation of the social constructivist theory of learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

In French language learning, it is proven that the construction of knowledge through group work outperforms individual learning. When learning a foreign language, collaboration and active participation of the students are crucial. In a traditional class, teacher gives often the students a chance to collaborate face to face, critique one another, share knowledge and compare their new ideas with one another. However, according to the study carried out, in the French language classes conducted via Zoom, it is very difficult to have the same social affective and cognitive benefits realized in face-to-face classes. Virtual platform in the Zoom sessions pose communication obstacles because of the distance and differences in technology between collaborators. It is revealed that the students do not tend to speak up even though sometimes they want to: they say that since they get the feeling that no one is paying attention to them and that they are simply behind a screen, they do not want to even make an effort by unmuting their microphones. They also mention that they do not want to correct their peers or even share their ideas due to this virtual barrier. Thus, the study revealed that there is no instant feedback from the teacher and their peers. This demotivated each individual. Since French is a foreign language for all the students in this study, collaborative work and active participation of each individual is necessary to improve their language.

Virtual communication in the Zoom sessions does not allow the students to show their feelings, emotions and nonverbal cues. Emotion indicates social presence, but in a virtual environment, representing feelings become difficult and lack of emotions impedes communication when collaborators often rely on the interpretation of interaction. Several students mentioned that they miss the traditional classroom atmosphere. Majority of the students mentioned that since they are new to this language which is not used in their day today life, they do not dare to ask direct

questions from the teacher or to ask him or her to explain the lesson again. In the traditional classroom, teacher identifies quickly their difficulties by looking at their facial expressions. However, this understanding did not happen on Zoom sessions and the students mentioned that they stay silent most of the time. Moreover, the students indicated that they cannot understand the reactions of their fellow students most of the time which result in interruption of proper communication. It is discovered that without social cues, online communication and collaboration frustrate participants. Visual cues are a significant mode of communication in face-to-face situations and the lack of visual prompts act as a barrier in virtual collaboration and make students more and more passive observers rather than active participants in the class.

The inconsistency of participants presents another barrier to effective online collaboration and active participation. It is found out that the instability of participants leaves a collaborative group in an indeterminate state. Majority of the students mentioned that they find instability of their fellow students as a barrier to their communication. The sudden disappearance and the silence of the peers make them demotivated and disturbed. It is revealed that the longer periods of collaboration and meaningful dialogue increase the levels of sustainability; yet according to the study, the students hardly get a chance to have longer periods of collaboration due to the limited time allocated for the Zoom sessions. The opinion of every student is that the ability to cooperate in Zoom sessions does not equate to social connectivity or guarantee the development of a relationship with others as it was used to be in the traditional class.

Moreover, 30% of the students mentioned that slow internet connectivity as one of their worst experiences which could be due to low internet bandwidth. Even though this issue is connected to technical side, it directly affects their participation in the class. The students mentioned that when they get back in the Zoom session after having a connection issue, they feel like total strangers since they missed some parts of the lesson. They also noted that when they face such technical issues, they lose their interest and motivation.

Thus, collaboration and active participation of the students in French language learning have been shown to exert positive influences on students' learning. There is evidence that in a classroom where learners articulate, share their understandings and actively participate, there is potential for sharing the cognitive load of the learning task for greater on-task engagement and for more effective learning. However, according to the analysis of the data, effective collaboration and active participation of the students in Zoom sessions are at a low level which need to be improved with different strategies.

This study reveals that even though the students had positive attitudes towards online learning because of its benefits (flexibility and continuation of their learning), they are faced with some challenges such as difficulty in communication with their fellow students, lack of sense of community and absence of real-time feedback which results in lack of activeness of the students. Existence of these challenges is an indication that the students participating in Zoom sessions with the aim of improving their French language could not realize the maximum benefits of collaborative learning.

Lack of visible body language of the teacher and the fellow students

Nonverbal communication is often considered to be more subtle and more effective than verbal communication and is capable of conveying meaning better than words. For example, a smile might convey a feeling easier than words. It is a known fact that the most of our face-to-face conversations are nonverbal language, and that the gestures express our feelings and attitudes without saying a word. When it comes to French language teaching, there is a significant correlation between the teacher's appropriate and timely nonverbal behaviours and students' achievement and good behaviour. The findings of this study indicated that there was a correlation between the teacher's nonverbal communication and students' learning and motivation.

Total Physical Response is a language teaching theory which tries to teach a language through physical activities. It emphasizes

comprehension and the use of physical actions to teach a foreign language. In teaching a foreign language, James Asher, the advocate of the theory, believes that the Total Physical Response sees successful adult second or foreign language learning as a process paralleled to child first language acquisition. He feels that adults should follow the processes by which children acquire their mother tongue in learning a second or a foreign language. Asher also shares with the teachers that when they are teaching a foreign language, they would better use the Total Physical Response teaching method to facilitate students' learning (Asher, 1977).

According to the data gathered from the students, 75% of the students mentioned that they are not capable of properly understanding the body language of their teacher through the screen in their Zoom sessions and this situation made them feel a little lost. Majority of the students stated that they can hardly understand the gestures of the teacher and the other students. According to the students, facial expressions, eye contact and the physical appearance of the teacher make them feel engaged in the lesson and these gestures are more effective than other modes of nonverbal cues and help them to even understand the language better.

65% of the students said that they feel a little lost since most of them rely on nonverbal behaviour of the teacher to recognize when to speak, when to let others speak, and how to speak. According to them, teacher's body language is effective when he or she is present in front of them rather than seeing him or her sitting in front of a screen. It is found out that the activeness of the teacher that the students noticed in the traditional class motivates them to stay engaged in the lesson and to learn French enthusiastically. The students said that the lack of visible body language of the teacher in Zoom sessions make them feel demotivated and distant. Moreover, the absence of proper eye-contact of the teacher with students make them feel ignored. According to the students, the eye-contact of the teacher and the look given for each individual is really important for them to feel recognized in the class. The teacher must look at individual students. Otherwise, the students will have the impression that the teacher is ignoring them; hence, the effect of looking at the students is undeniable. However, when

teaching French language via Zoom, proper eye-contact cannot be maintained properly.

60% of the students mentioned that they feel anxious and fearful when the teacher says their name and asks questions. They said that they tend to forget the answers when they hear their name all of a sudden. They mentioned that in traditional class they easily understand the flow of the lesson and they anticipate the questions from the teacher and also their turn to answer, however, in Zoom sessions, they feel very distant and do not anticipate. According to them, the main reason is the lack of visible body language. This lack of visible body language of the teacher thus affects the relationship with the students. The students tend to feel little by little distant and demotivated to engage in the lesson.

Brophy, an American educational psychologist defines motivation as a theoretical construct to explain the initiation, direction, intensity, persistence, and quality of behaviour, especially goal-directed behaviour. Motivation has been centre of attention among language teachers throughout the years because it constitutes the backbone of language learning process (Brophy, 2010). Through this study, it was found out that when teaching French language via Zoom, the students do not get to understand the body language of the teacher and their fellow students due to the lack of proper visibility. Owing to this situation, students tend to slowly lose their willingness and interest towards lesson, which puts a major barrier in front of effective language learning in the long run.

Absence of the traditional classroom setting and the company of fellow students

According to the findings of this study, 85% of the students feel a sense of isolation owing to absence of the company of their fellow students and the traditional classroom setting. Even though, the interactions are considered to be the central emphasis in French language learning, majority of the students of Alliance Française de Kotte who are learning French language via Zoom do not get the opportunity to interact properly. According to many studies, one of the greatest drawbacks of online French language teaching is isolation. Being in different areas across the country, it can be

easily felt for the students that they are on their own, rather than being a part of the learning community.

Several students mentioned that when they are learning French language in Zoom sessions, they get the feeling that they are in separate rooms and do not get the urge to interact like in the traditional classroom. This is especially true in the asynchronous classroom environment. Majority of the students do not feel as a part of their learning community. They also said that they miss the face-to-face interaction that a traditional class gives them. Due to the lack of interaction, the students do not get the opportunity to practice what they have learnt.

Traditional classrooms have positive social aspects that can be lost in online learning environments. There are certain activities that are beneficial to complete when learning a foreign language within a team-oriented environment. Think-pair-share and roundtable-style discussions are classic active learning strategies that benefit from face-to-face student interaction. Traditional face-to-face classes also provide teachers with opportunities to have a more personal interaction with students. This helps to create the feeling of community in the classroom, which is an important factor in student retention. Moreover, several students stated that face-to-face learning enables their teacher to visualize whether or not students are truly comprehending the material that is being taught. According to the study, it is discovered that the absence of the traditional classroom setting and the company of the friends tend to slowly erode the desire of the students to learn French language.

A student stated that a lot of grammar lessons are difficult to understand and to get excited about when they are on their own and that if they get to discuss and argue with their friends like in the traditional classroom, it would be much easier and interesting. It was felt that verbal and written communication could not be a complete substitute for hearing a human voice or seeing another person for real in classroom.

85% of the students felt a sense of isolation which arose from the geographical separation and lack of contact with fellow students.

They mentioned the term isolation specifically and said that they felt it was a problem for their French language learning, with one describing her learning as “boring” and a “solo mission”. Moreover, it is also found out that the absence of face-to-face communication with the teacher during Zoom sessions, causes social isolation, and causes students to feel a lack of pressure. The lack of pressure can be a disadvantage in the sense that it could cause students to abandon their studies more easily. Even though, constant nudging by the teacher may be undesirable for many students, it is considered to be an effective method for improving student retention.

Hence, it is necessary to give the students an opportunity to engage in active cognitive processing; it demands that they participate in making meaning out of content; and, it forces them to contextualize that meaning among a social group. Discussions are thus an excellent way to allow students to make meaning together by comparing and contrasting various perspectives of the content which cannot be practiced effectively in Zoom sessions when learning French language like in a traditional classroom. Hence, it is important to have frequent encouragements from teacher as a proactive measure to make students feel like they are not studying alone and to help with motivation and to encourage a dialogue between the student, teacher and the fellow students. According to the results, it is necessary to mingle traditional classroom atmosphere in the Zoom sessions as much as possible to keep students motivated and interested.

Preference between learning French language via Zoom and face-to-face class

The last part of the questionnaire attempts to examine the preference of French language learning method of the students: traditional classroom or the Zoom sessions. After the analysis of the data, it was revealed that 75% of the students would prefer to learn French in a traditional classroom; if they are given a choice between Zoom sessions and a traditional classroom for French language learning, they would select the second option. According to students, the traditional class significantly gives a deeper understanding of French language while giving them a lot of

freedom to practice what they have learnt and to share their ideas with the fellow students. Moreover, it is found out that 60% of the students find it quite difficult to feel motivated enough to study via Zoom; due to lack of liveliness and the interaction in Zoom sessions, their desire to learn French language erodes slowly. Even though majority of the students said that continuing to learn French language via Zoom is better than doing nothing during the pandemic, they do not find learning French language via Zoom as effective as learning French language in the traditional class owing to various challenges. 84% of the students mentioned that when learning a foreign language, they need to have a lot of interactions, liveliness, body language and also the company of their fellow students.

The study of the data thus implies that the students' preference is to learn French language in the traditional classroom. In Zoom sessions, the student is not directly interacting with the others. Therefore, when they get questions, students find it rather difficult to ask it from their teacher, as communication is often very impersonal. Majority of the students thinks that interacting with their teacher live is the best way to learn, as it is interactive and allows for two-way communication. In the traditional class, students can directly share their views and clarify their questions with the teacher, thus getting their questions answered right away. It is considered that social presence as a quality of the communication medium itself (Preisman, 2014).

One student remarked, "Languages are hard to learn without any direct face-to-face instruction time from the teacher". Although groups can be created in Zoom that allow students to complete collaborative work and converse online, some students indicated a lack of value associated with such collaborations. Thus, the researcher found that although learning French language via Zoom did promote learning, it did not necessarily motivate students by creating an effective outcome.

Conclusions

In congruence with the fast-developing world of ICT and the current situation of the world due to the COVID-19 pandemic,

there is a radical transformation of French language teaching from traditional class to online teaching via Zoom. Teaching French language online has become a necessity. The objectives of this study were to examine the students' perceptions on French language teaching through Zoom application at the French language institute of Alliance Française de Kotte and to identify the challenges faced by the students. According to the findings, although the students improved their French language to a certain extent and perceived online learning via Zoom beneficial, this study found out a certain number of challenges faced by the students when learning French language via Zoom at the French Language Institute of Alliance Française de Kotte which are substantial in making online French language teaching more effective and productive in the future. Learners' issues included learners' expectations, readiness, identity, participation in online courses, the inadequate interaction and lack of immediate feedback. It was observed that the lack of collaboration on online instruction tend to slowly turn students into passive observers rather than active participants and the lack of visible body language of their teacher and the other students slowly reduces their motivation which will affect their learning negatively in the long run. Moreover, it was proven that without the classroom setting and the company of their fellow students, some students began to feel a sense of isolation that slowly erodes their desire to learn.

In conclusion, the study showed the efficacy of French language teaching via Zoom was not at par when compared to teaching in the traditional class. The data also reflected an unsatisfactory improvement of speaking skills which is a serious matter of concern. A key factor affecting the development of speaking particularly was the lack of speech practice tools on Zoom and online. It is suggested that it can be addressed by the use of synchronous tools such as video conferencing and online classroom environments which increases the efficiency of online learning.

Thus, there is a lot of efforts to be put by teachers and the students to improve the educational quality of teaching and learning of French language when applying new technologies such as Zoom. In order to minimize the drawbacks of French language teaching

via Zoom, it is essential to blend with classroom-based approaches rather than simply making Zoom a substitute for classroom courses. Based on the findings, it is recommended to coordinate virtual group activities using chats, discussion boards or cloud tools for collaboration and to schedule regular check-ins with students via email or chat to maintain the classroom dynamic in a digital environment. Further research can be conducted in order to find out ways to develop French language teaching and learning experience via online technological platforms such as Zoom.

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