

# Online foreign language learning at the tertiary level: Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic

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## Abstract

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic caused a recourse to online teaching in many parts of the world, and for several disciplines, including foreign language learning. Although quite an amount of research has been conducted on Online Foreign Language Learning (OFL), issues relating to OFLL in philology programs have received relatively little attention. Furthermore, differences in students' experiences according to the foreign language of study remain under-researched. The current paper addresses this gap using both quantitative and qualitative methods. A survey was conducted among one thousand, one hundred and five [1,105] (former) students of an African university. The researchers examined the new methods applied in the teaching of Arabic, Chinese, French, Kiswahili, Russian, and Spanish as foreign languages at the research setting during the COVID-19 pandemic. The

study investigated the challenges encountered by participants, participants' perceptions of OFLL, and its impact on their performance. The findings showed that challenges encountered by participants included issues such as inadequate physical interaction in the foreign language and problems with internet connectivity. However, the findings also suggest that OFLL has certain advantages such as the reduction of anxiety and the increase of foreign language enjoyment among learners. These findings suggest that OFLL has some benefits which foreign language institutions should make good use of even beyond times of crisis. Measures to achieve this include the usage of efficient online learning management software and the provision of digital training programs for students and teachers.

**Keywords:** Online foreign language learning, COVID-19, foreign language enjoyment, foreign language anxiety, tertiary level

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## Introduction

Online foreign language courses offered by educational institutions and commercial organizations have over the years seen a rapid growth as a result of the advancement of technology and the advent of globalization. These online language learning courses are often either Web-facilitated, hybrid, or fully virtual classes (Blake, 2011). In contrast to these classes which are offered in normal times however, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic altered the lives of people all over the globe, including students, and brought with it a new revolution of online learning. With the implementation of social distancing and lockdown measures to curb the spread of the virus, online learning<sup>1</sup> became not merely the new trend but rather the new normal in many parts of the world, including Ghana.

Online learning has been described by scholars as the “most difficult to define” (Singh & Thurman, 2019, p. 290). However, it can be considered as learning experienced “through the internet/online computers in a *synchronous* classroom where students interact with instructors and other students and are not dependent on their physical location for participating in this online learning experience” or “through internet in

<sup>1</sup> The genesis of online university degrees has been traced as far back as the 1980s (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020).

an *asynchronous* environment where students engage with instructors and fellow students at a time of their convenience and do not need to be co-present online or in a physical space” (Singh & Thurman, 2019, p. 302). It is interesting to note that Gacs, Goertler, and Spasova point out that the transition from traditional in-person classes during the pandemic would be more accurately referred to as “crisis-prompted remote teaching” for which reason “quality expectations must be lowered especially in regard to ... learning outcomes” (2020, p. 380). Indeed, as Maican and Cocoradă (2021) note, the pandemic posed a threat to quality education, the fourth of the Sustainable Development Goals set by the United Nations due to reasons such as the sudden demand for appropriate technological infrastructure, the requirement of good digital literacy skills and adequate mastery of distance learning pedagogies.

Although the unexpected implementation of remote learning evoked challenges for both teachers and students worldwide, the context of foreign language learning (FLL) is particularly interesting and worthy of research due to the interplay of cognitive, affective, and pedagogical factors in FLL. The complexity herein is succinctly illustrated in Douglas Fir Group’s (2016) proposed transdisciplinary framework which concludes that:

Language learning is a complex, ongoing, multifaceted phenomenon that involves the dynamic and variable interplay among a range of individual neurobiological mechanisms and cognitive capacities and L2 learners’ diverse experiences in their multilingual worlds occurring over their life spans and along three interrelated levels of social activity: the micro level of social action and interaction, the meso-level of sociocultural institutions and communities, and the macro level of ideological structures (Douglas Fir Group, 2016, p. 36).

Unlike other disciplines where the objective of students is to learn the content alone, the foreign language class is unique in that students from this discipline need to learn the contents as well as the form. As Long (1983) puts it, language is “both the vehicle and object of instruction” (p.9, cited in Seedhouse, 2009, p. 2). This gives rise to an intricate web of factors ranging from pedagogical features (e.g., course design, teaching methodology) to personal learner characteristics (e.g., introversion/extroversion) and psychological/ emotional undercurrents (e.g., foreign language anxiety and foreign language enjoyment) that come into play in the foreign language learning process. It is therefore not surprising that FLL has been described as a form of “mental gymnastics” (Farjami, 2012; Herron, 1982). Cohen, on his part, describes the language learner as an individual with a “personal baggage” (Cohen, 2010, p. 161) which determines their rate and level of success in foreign language learning.

These metaphors reveal the distinctiveness of FLL, especially the stress and anxiety involved. It illustrates the involvement of complex factors—emotions worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic and not easily paired with the imagery of a conducive learning environment. The amalgamation of FLL intricacies on the one hand, and COVID-19-invoked education challenges, on the other hand, has created an urgent need for “relevant information regarding sustainable FL learning by means of technology” (Maican & Cocoradă, 2021, p. 2). Questions such as the following are therefore pertinent:

1. Which (new) methods were applied in the online education of foreign languages during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What were the challenges encountered by students during the era?
3. How did students’ experiences and perceptions during the period impact their learning of foreign languages?

## **Previous Work on Online (Foreign Language) Learning**

In tandem with the rapid expansion of the popularity of online language courses, quite an amount of literature can be found on the topic. As a result of what Lin and Warschauer describe as a “natural scepticism toward online language teaching” (2015, p. 394), most of these studies focus on the proficiency outcomes of such courses. These published studies mostly report that language learning is equally as effective when done online as when it is done offline (Goertler, 2019; Lin & Warschauer, 2015; Moneypenny & Aldrich, 2016). Others have found that online/blended studies do have a minor advantage over face-to-face classes in a classroom (Goertler & Gacs, 2018). Much of this research also centres on the efficacy of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) (Maican & Cocoradă, 2021).

Before narrowing down on current research on OFLL during the time of crisis, it would be beneficial to provide a brief survey of general research on remote teaching/learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Several interesting studies have centred on student perspectives (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Aguilera-Hermida, 2020), whereas others have approached the issue by seeking insights from lecturers (Bakhmat, Babakina, & Belmaz, 2021). Given the global nature of the pandemic, these studies have come from all over the world; for example, China (Demuyakor, 2020), Ukraine (Nenko, Kybalna, & Snisarenko, 2020), Ghana (Agormedah, Henaku, Ayite, & Ansah, 2020; Henaku, 2020; Ogbonnaya, Awoniyi, & Matabane, 2020; Owusu-Fordjour, Koomson, & Hanson, 2020) and Malaysia (Chung, Subramaniam, & Dass, 2020). Some have focused on entire continents such as Africa (Paschal & Mkulu, 2020) whereas others provided comparative studies between countries (Aguilera-Hermida et al., 2021).

Given the unanticipated nature of the outbreak and the novelty of the online learning approach for most students and teachers, these studies have mostly focused on the challenges of online learning. A number of them reveal that there is a greater

preference for the traditional face-to-face (F2F) classes rather than the remote learning/teaching approach. Chung et al., for example, took into consideration factors such as gender and type of qualification sought and found that “more than half of the respondents indicated that if given a choice, they do not want to continue with online learning in the future” (2020, p. 46).

Dhawan (2020) examined the importance of online learning and undertook a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Challenges (SWOC) analysis of e-learning approaches during the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters. The author noted time flexibility, location flexibility, catering to a wide audience, wide availability of courses and content, and immediate feedback as part of its strengths. Technical difficulties, learner’s capability and confidence level, time management, distractions, frustration, anxiety, confusion, and lack of personal/physical attention were listed as the weaknesses. In relation to the opportunities, the author mentioned scope for innovation and digital development, designing flexible programs, strengthening skills (problem solving, critical thinking, adaptability), the fact that users can be of any age, and an innovative pedagogical approach. Factors listed for the challenges included unequal distribution of ICT infrastructure, compromising on the quality of education, digital illiteracy, digital divide and technology cost and obsolescence (Dhawan, 2020).

In relation to language learning, Gacs et al. (2020) discuss challenges with online (language) learning and provide recommendations for preparing, planning, implementing, and evaluating online language education. Egbert (2020) focuses on how engagement in language tasks can be used to support learners’ achievement and maintain students’ and teachers’ positive attitudes. She highlights the importance of understanding the “engagement facilitators” that assist teachers in engaging students and provides the example of, “authenticity, which can be defined as learners’ perceptions that the task is meaningful, valuable, and/or enjoyable” (Egbert, 2020, p. 316). The author

notes that if teachers perceive times of crisis as “an opportunity to spread task engagement, a new pandemic in language learning might come of it” (Egbert, 2020, p. 318).

Additionally, Maican and Cocoradă’s (2021) study examined students’ behaviours, emotions and perceptions towards online FL classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using quantitative as well as qualitative methods, they focused on task value, self-perceived foreign language proficiency, stressors, students’ preferences, and perceptions in relation to Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) and Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE). Their study revealed a negative association between anxiety and FLE. They also found that there was a protective role of retrospective enjoyment in trying times and a higher level of enjoyment with lower-achieving students. Regarding students’ preferences, they found that certain online resources such as PowerPoint presentations were preferred during the pandemic. In relation to participants’ opinions regarding the use of entirely or partially online FL teaching, they reported that the exclusive use of remote teaching/learning platforms in the COVID-19 period was rejected by the majority of the participants, whereas blended learning was rejected by fewer than half. They also reported that many students found tasks to be more demanding compared to face-to-face education and concluded that learning during the pandemic posed a threat and could be frustrating. On the other hand, some students also reported positive emotions towards attending the online FL classes. Maican and Cocoradă’s (2021) study is novel in that they also discussed coping strategies and noted that positive attitudes towards online learning resources could increase resilience amid traumas.

Despite the plethora of research on the topic, questions pertaining to OFLL in philology programs remain unanswered. Additionally, differences in students’ experiences according to foreign language disciplines remain under-researched. Yet, answers to these issues are needed in order to promote quality and sustainable post-COVID foreign language remote learning/

teaching in all forms of institutions and irrespective of the program structure. This is necessary because of the increasing importance of globalization, digitalization, and the associated multicultural competence that they require. As Maican and Cocoradă (2021) point out, European Union institutions, for example, uphold multilingual competence as part of lifelong learning which offers advantages in the academic field, as well as in the international job markets, and provides personal fulfilment, inter-cultural understanding and social inclusion. Consequently, given the importance of FLL as well as lessons learnt from the pandemic regarding the unpredictability of life, the promotion of quality and sustainable FLL through education technology cannot be underestimated. In the present research, the authors seek to:

1. Examine the new methods applied in the teaching of Arabic, Chinese, French, Kiswahili, Russian, and Spanish as foreign languages at an African university during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Investigate the challenges encountered by students during the era.
3. Analyse the impact of students' experiences and perceptions on their learning of foreign languages.

## **Method**

The methods used in the current study are described below.

### **Research context**

The study was carried out among students of the Department of Modern Languages and the Department of French at an African university. Language courses taught at the Modern Languages Department included Arabic, Chinese, Kiswahili, Russian, and Spanish. Each of these languages has an autonomous division known as a section (e.g., Spanish Section,



Russian Section, etc.). As a result of the University's admission policy, not all students of the Sections/Departments chose their foreign language program voluntarily.<sup>2</sup> Some students are obliged to study the courses they are given by the University because of the bouquet system or simply because those are the courses that have not superseded the admission quota for student enrollment. All the undergraduate courses from both Departments consist of four-year philology programs that offer orals, grammar, translation, civilization, and literature classes. After the third year of study, students have the option to do a year-abroad program in a country where the language being learnt is spoken. During the COVID-19 pandemic, some Sections had to cancel the year-abroad program because the country of destination was not accepting visa applications (e.g., the Chinese Section).

During the pre-COVID period, regular classes were entirely face-to-face, and lecturers were expected to attend physical classes although the University had established an online learning platform – SAKAI LMS. The online learning platform was, however, used only by a few lecturers for class exercises and quizzes as a solution to the large student numbers and for ease of assessment, grading and recording. Apart from this, the University was offering distance learning programs that were sometimes given online, and the university-required courses (UGRC) which normally had large numbers of students were also held online. Consequently, the majority of both academics and students were not familiar with the usage of SAKAI and many of those who had used it complained about having experienced challenges. When the first case of COVID-19 was reported in Ghana in March 2020, classes were moved online completely. This was a drastic change for most students and lecturers alike. In the second year of the outbreak in Ghana, the

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<sup>2</sup> For the Bachelor of Arts (BA) program, applicants are required to select subjects from the list of bouquets provided. Up to four (4) subject bouquets must be selected in order of preference. All students entering the BA program must offer three (3) subjects at Level 100, two (2) subjects at Level 200 and Level 300 and either two (2) subjects or one (1) subject at Level 400.

mode of teaching was changed from full-time online teaching to the blended mode of teaching.

### **Data collection and materials**

A survey was conducted in the 2020/2021 academic year among (former) students who had enrolled into the above-mentioned foreign language programs. The sample was obtained by snowball sampling that involved sending WhatsApp requests to lecturers of the two Departments and asking them to forward the survey to their students. The link was also sent to student representatives who were asked to share the invitation with their colleagues.

The survey instrument contained both close-ended items for quantitative data as well as open-ended items for qualitative information. It was an online questionnaire via Google Forms. The authors designed the questionnaire using selected items from Horwitz, and Cope's (1986) FL anxiety scale and Dewaele and MacIntyre's (2014) FL enjoyment scale as the kernel. The selected items were rephrased so that they reflect the online vs. in-person modes of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. The questionnaire had three parts. Part 1 elicited demographic information of participants (e.g., age, nationality, level, gender, etc.). Part 2 contained questions on participants' FLL experience in general (e.g., self-rating, self-confidence, FL anxiety, FL enjoyment) and the new methods employed during the pandemic. Part 3 was composed of questions on participants' perceptions of the "*new normal*" (e.g., major obstacles during the online FL classes etc.).

### **Participants and procedure**

One thousand, one hundred and five (1,105) (former) students participated in the study. Their average age range was 18 – 23. The sample was composed of both males (26.9%) and females (72.3%); 99.4% of them were Ghanaians. Thirty per

cent (30%) of them were first-year students, 43.1% were in their second year, 15.2% were in their third year, 5.5% were final year students and postgraduate students constituted 1.8%. Former students [4.9%] who had graduated from the University the previous year (2019/2020) and were serving as National Service Personnel at the Departments were also invited to participate in the study. The distribution of participants for the foreign language courses were as follows: Arabic [15%], Chinese [22.1%], French [33.2%], Kiswahili [8.1%], Russian [15%] and Spanish [14.5%].

The survey data was analysed using SPSS. Following the quantitative phase of the study, qualitative data obtained via participants' responses to the open-ended question "any further comments?" was used to support the initial findings from the questionnaire.

## **Findings**

Below, we discuss the findings.

### **Methods applied in the teaching of the FLs during the COVID-19 pandemic**

When asked about the method of teaching they liked the most, the overarching majority of participants (79.2%) confirmed a preference for F2F classes. The findings showed that during the period of the pandemic, however, videos, audios, soft copies of books and PowerPoint slides were the most used. Of these, audio recordings were the most frequently used, followed by books, videos, and PowerPoint slides. Regarding the platform used, the data showed a greater usage of Zoom (79%) than the University eLearning platform–SAKAI (2.1%). Additionally, participants indicated that the mediums of teaching they enjoyed most were Zoom, videos, books, audios, and PowerPoint. Table 1 below summarizes students' preferences for the mode of teaching:

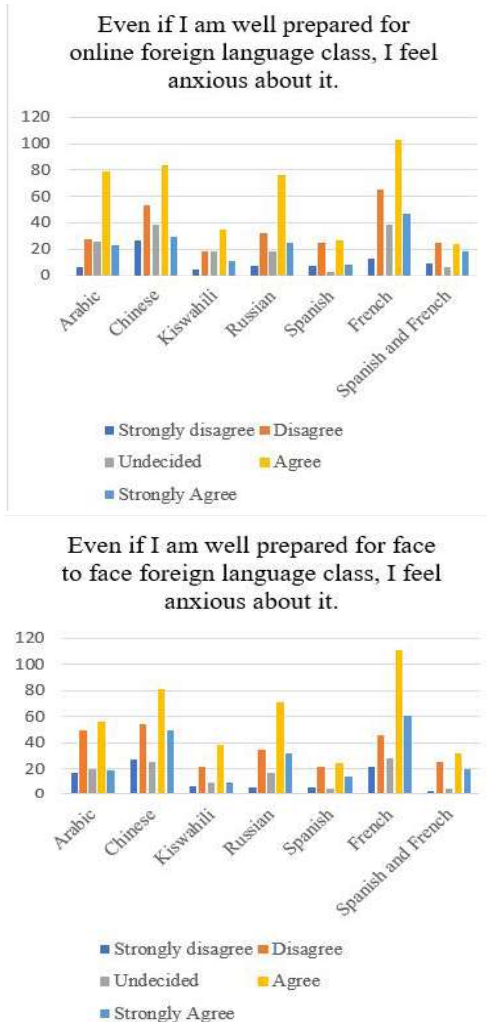
**Table 1:** New methods used in teaching FLs during the pandemic

Question	Responses	Frequency	%
Which method of teaching do you like the most? (Please circle all that apply.)	F2F (In-class teaching)	862	79.2
	Uploaded recordings	231	21.2
	Online classes (e.g., Zoom, SAKAI etc.)	258	23.7
	Uploaded documents	199	18.3
What was the method of teaching used for the language? (Please circle all that apply.)	Audio recordings	637	58.4
	Books	623	57.2
	Videos	590	54.1
	PowerPoint slides	579	53.1
Which method of teaching did you enjoy the most? (Please circle all that apply.)	Zoom	417	39.1
	Videos	401	37.6
	Books	347	32.5
	Audios	310	29.1
	PowerPoint slides	284	26.6

Reasons for students' preference for one mode of teaching over the other could be closely linked to factors such as their perceived self-rating as well as foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA). Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope define FLCA as the "distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning" (1986, p. 128). They posit that FLCA is an instance of specific anxiety reactions involving performance evaluation within an academic and social context.

In line with the assertions of Horwitz et al. (1986), the data from the current study suggests that the majority of students did experience FLCA both during online classes and F2F lessons. Participants were asked to respond to the questions "Even if I am well prepared for online FL class, I feel anxious

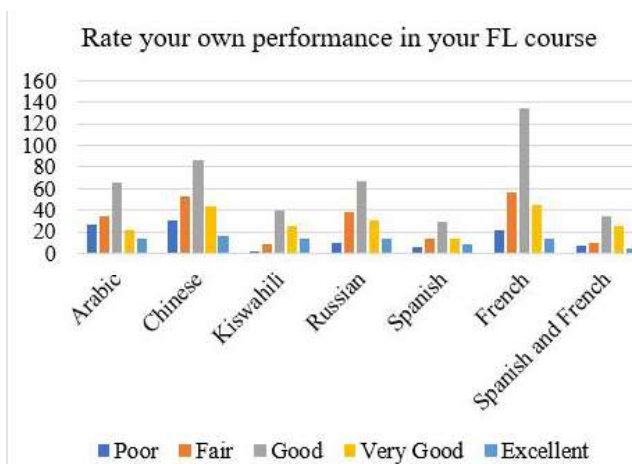
about it” and “Even if I am well prepared for F2F FL class, I feel anxious about it”. The majority of students<sup>3</sup> agreed with both statements even though there was a slight difference (reduction) in the percentage of students who admitted experiencing anxiety during online lessons (54.3%) than F2F classes (56.8%). Figure 1 below summarizes the findings by language.



**Figure 1:** Participants’ anxiety during online vs. F2F classes.

<sup>3</sup> For the total population.

In general, low-performing students tend to be more anxious about their performance although the reverse may also be the case. High-performing students could experience anxiety as a result of their desire to maintain their level of performance. Students' self-rating, i.e., perceptions of personal competence, could very well be a good reflection of their actual performance (see Shi, 2011). When asked to rate their performance on a scale of poor-fair-good-very good-excellent, the majority of participants (for the individual language categories) rated their performance as 'good'. The rating that had the next highest selection was 'fair' for all the languages except Kiswahili, Spanish and French and Spanish<sup>4</sup> The findings are illustrated in Figure 2 below:



**Figure 2:** Participants' self-rating.

The anxiety experienced by students, their self-rating as well as their self-confidence are all possible factors that explain the patterns in participants' preferred mode of teaching. This is illustrated in the following quotation from one of the participants:

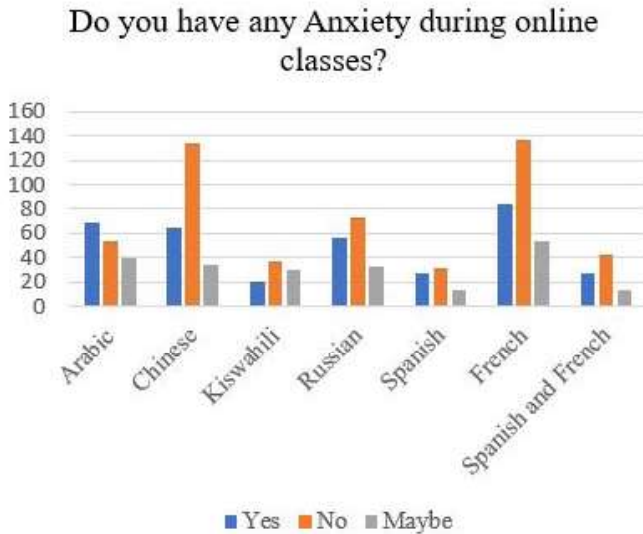
<sup>4</sup>Spanish and French are the only possible modern language combinations in the University.

## Extract 1

“I prefer online teaching via Zoom because I’m less anxious and can answer questions boldly because, well, no one knows who’s talking. I’m very shy so I prefer the online classes. Face-to-face classes are very intimidating, and it is very hard to answer a question or even ask a question in class. Everyone turns to look at you like some alien the minute you put up your hand to answer or ask a question. But with the online mode because no one knows who’s talking it’s better and more relieving. I still get anxious though when reading a text or answering a question, but I’ll prefer the online mode a 100% over the face-to-face mode of teaching and learning” (Gender: prefer not to say, L200, French, 18-20yrs, self-rating: good).

Horwitz et al. (1986) identify three related performance anxieties which constitute Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety: (1) communication apprehension; (2) test anxiety; (3) fear of negative evaluation. The above quotation clearly shows that the usage of Zoom enabled the participant to cope with her communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation.

In tandem with the above finding, the majority (512 [47.3%]) answered ‘no’; 352 (32.5%) answered ‘yes’ whereas 219 (20.2%) answered ‘maybe’ to the following direct question: “Do you have any anxiety during online classes?”. The differences between participants’ levels of general anxiety during online lessons is illustrated in Figure 3 below according to language groups.



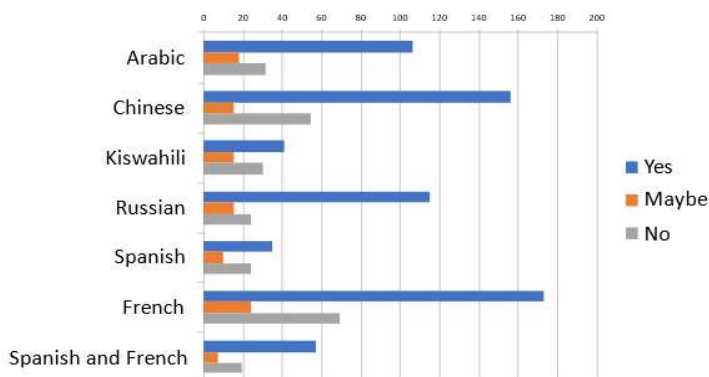
**Figure 3:** Differences in levels of anxiety during online classes by language group.

### **Challenges encountered due to the implementation of (new) methods of OFLL**

Regarding the challenges encountered by students due to the adoption of the (new) methods of teaching, the vast majority of students for each language group confirmed that they had experienced some significant difficulties. The information is summarized in Figure 4.



## Did you encounter any major obstacles during the online FL classes during the pandemic?



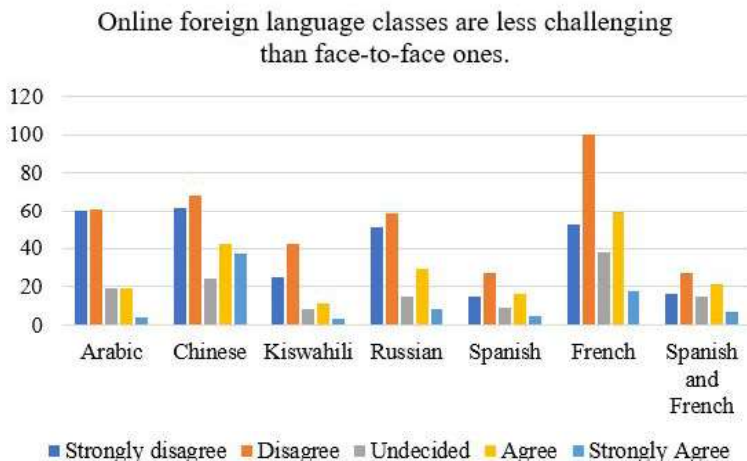
**Figure 4:** Perceptions of difficulties encountered during online learning.

Likewise, of the total sample, more than half of the participants affirmed that they encountered some major difficulties during the COVID-19 online classes. Additionally, the majority (62.3%) of the total sample disagreed with the assertion that online foreign language classes are less challenging than F2F ones. Factors which most contributed to students' challenges during the period included issues such as internet connectivity, problems with flow of communication and difficulties in adjusting to the *new normal*. Results are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Challenges with online teaching

<b>Question</b>	<b>Responses</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>%</b>
Did you encounter any major obstacles during the online foreign language classes during the pandemic?	Yes	688	65.8
	No	253	24.2
	Maybe	104	10.0
If you answered yes to the previous question, please select the kind of problems you encountered. (Please choose all that apply).	Lack of reliable internet connection	587	75.4
	Problems with flow of information	321	41.3
	Difficulties in adjusting to the new normal	303	38.9
	Need for physical contact with lecturer	299	38.4
	Ineffective teaching strategies (e.g., problems with online learning platforms used and challenges with teaching strategies adopted)	251	32.3
	Need for physical interaction with classmates	238	30.6
	Lack of access to computers	113	14.5
Online foreign language classes are less challenging than face-to-face ones.	Strongly disagree	283	26.3
	Disagree	388	36.0
	Undecided	128	11.9
	Agree	197	18.3
	Strongly Agree	82	7.6

The distribution of participants’ responses by language groups regarding the assertion that online foreign language classes are less challenging than F2F ones is shown in Figure 5 below. The rate of disagreement was especially high for students of Arabic, Chinese, Kiswahili, Russian and French.

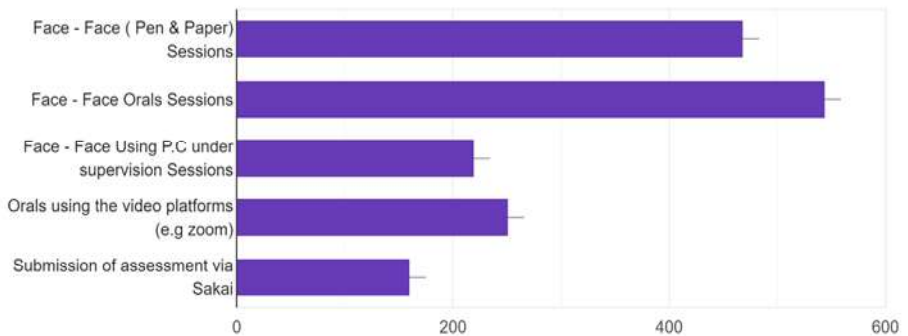


**Figure 5:** Participants’ perceptions of the level of difficulty of online classes vis-à-vis F2F ones.

In order to investigate the extent to which the mode of assessment contributed to their challenges, participants were asked to indicate whether they experienced anxiety during examinations. The majority 589 (55.8%) of participants confirmed that they did experience anxiety; 232 (22%) responded in the negative; and 234 (22.2%) were unsure. Findings regarding the contributory factors are presented in Figure 6.

If Yes, which of the following contribute to that? (Choose all that apply)

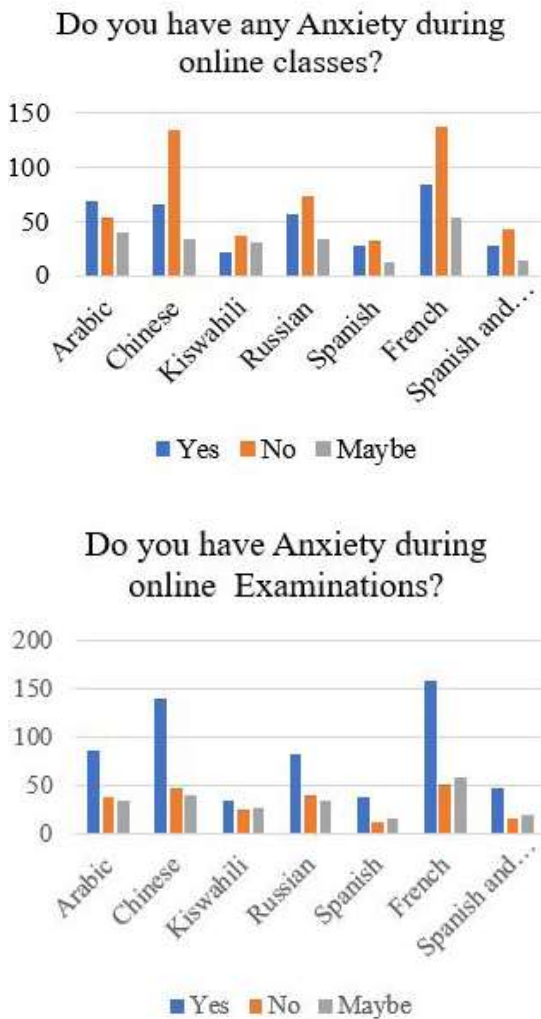
861 respuestas



**Figure 6:** The relationship between students' anxiety and the different modes of assessment.

As observed in Figure 6, students' levels of anxiety increased with certain modes (online/ offline) of assessment. When responses regarding online modes of assessment are compared with the traditional (in-person) methods, the findings show that participants found the former less challenging than the latter.

The findings also showed that students' anxiety was more pronounced during examinations than classes. This can be observed in Figure 7.



**Figure 7:** Comparison by languages between anxiety levels during classes and examinations.

## **Impact of students' experiences and perceptions on their learning of FLs**

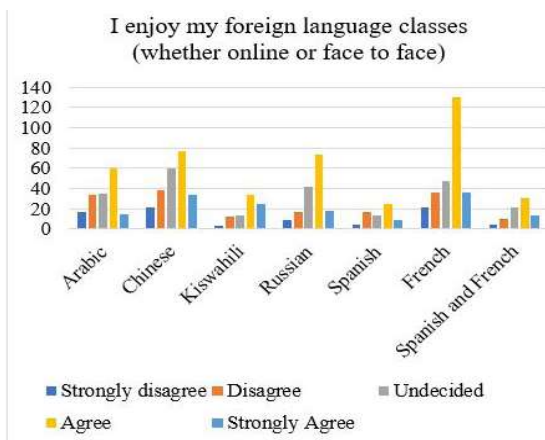
The study also sought to explore the impact of students' experiences and perceptions on their learning of foreign languages. Given the mitigating potential of positive emotions, the authors first investigated participants' levels of foreign language enjoyment. This was crucial since, as mentioned earlier, some students do not enroll in their foreign language of study 'by choice'. Dewaele and MacIntyre (2016) describe FLE as the "right foot" of the language learner (in comparison with foreign language anxiety which then becomes the "left foot"). It is an important positive emotion that helps to undo the potentially negative effects of foreign language anxiety, consequently assisting in the promotion of "personal resiliency in the face of difficulties" (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014, p. 241).

In line with these postulations, we were interested in investigating participants' levels of FLE in general. Participants were asked if they enjoy their FL (online or F2F) classes. Of the total sample, the majority of participants (54.9%) said they did enjoy their FL classes, 23.1% said 'no', whereas 22% were undecided. One student affirmed: "I really love and enjoy the course" (18-20, L100, Kiswahili, Male, Self-rating: very good). Another also stated:

### **Extract 2**

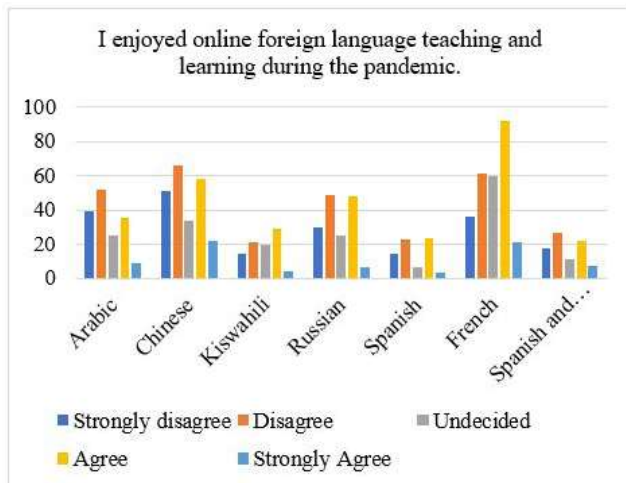
"I love my course, Arabic. I hope they make it easier and comprehensible through group presentations, creation of songs to make learning faster and more of practicals with Arabic expressions and adjectives to expedite our interest. I am new to the course, I think studying from concrete to abstract would be the best" (18-20, L100, Arabic, Female, Self-rating: good)

When analyzed across languages, Figure 8 below shows that the majority of participants in all the language groups answered in the affirmative.



**Figure 8:** Participants' levels of FLE across languages.

Since FL (online) class enjoyment was significantly relevant to students' perceptions during the stressful and anxiety-filled era of the global pandemic, the question was repeated in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Not surprisingly, the findings showed an existence of mixed feelings with the majority of participants (47.1%) indicating that they did not enjoy their FL classes during the pandemic. 35.6% confirmed that they did, whereas 17.2% were undecided. Figure 9 shows that participants from all the language groups, except Kiswahili and French, enjoyed their FLL experience less during the pandemic. For some languages (Russian and Spanish), there was only a slight difference between participants who agreed with the statement and those who disagreed.



**Figure 9:** Participants’ levels of FLE across languages during the pandemic.

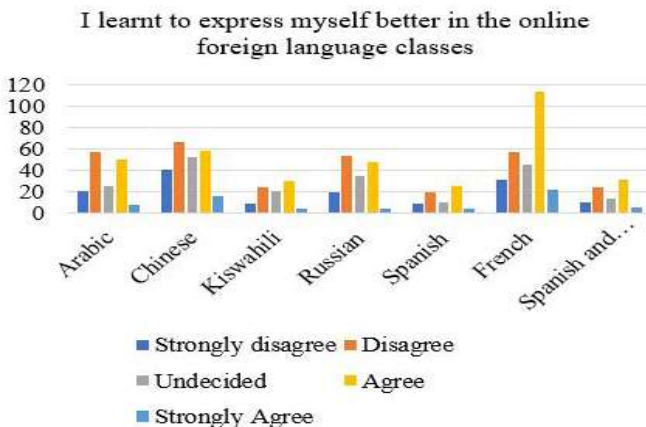
Closely linked to the ability to enjoy foreign language lessons is the ability to avoid anxiety and relax by, for example, laughing off embarrassing mistakes in the foreign language class. Participants’ ability to relax during a foreign language class was reflected in their responses as the majority (55.4%) confirmed that they were not embarrassed by the mistakes they made in class; 27.4% indicated that yes, they did feel embarrassed, whereas 17.2% were undecided. As Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) point out, “laughter that occurs when things do not go as planned can have a healthy effect on learners, taking the negative emotional tension out of the room” (p. 264). These results are illustrated by language in Figure 10.





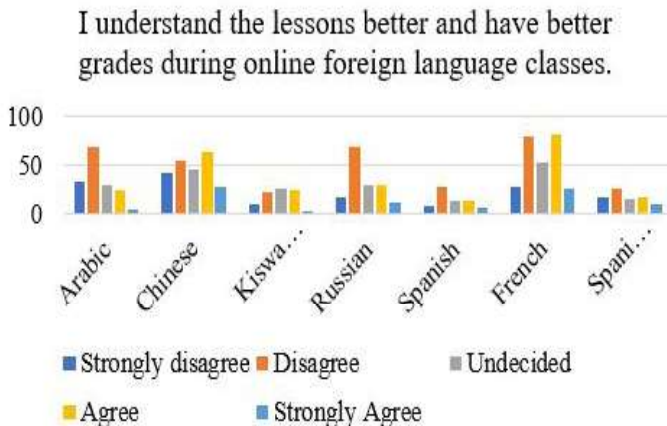
**Figure 10:** Participants’ feelings about the mistakes they make in class.

Despite the existence of generally positive emotions among the participants, the results showed that the majority of the participants did not believe that they learnt to express themselves better in the online foreign language classes. There was, however, only a slight difference between those who said that they did not (41.6 %) and those who confirmed that they did (39.4%); 19.1% were undecided. The data is presented in Figure 11 below.



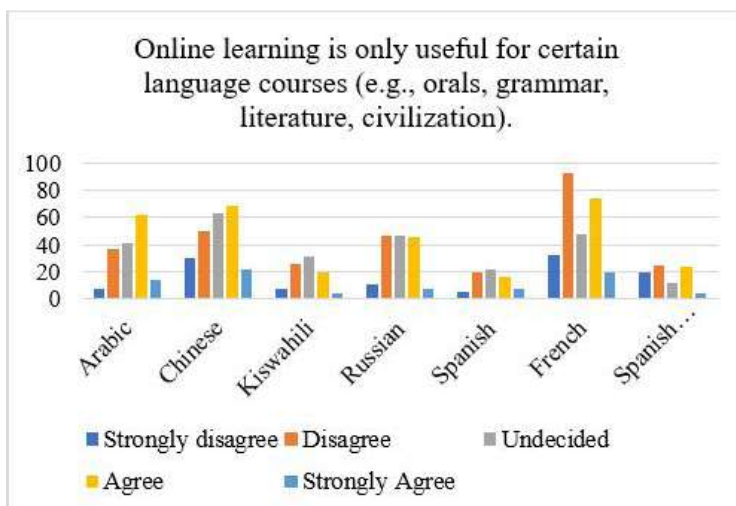
**Figure 11:** Participants’ perceptions of the effect of online learning on their oral performance across languages.

Likewise, the majority of participants (47.4%) did not believe there had been an improvement in their understanding of lessons and general performance during online foreign language classes. Thirty-two point five per cent (32.5%) believed there had been an improvement in their performance and 20.1% were undecided. The details by language of study are provided in Figure 12 below.



**Figure 12:** Effects of OFLL on participants’ general performance.

The study also explored students’ perceptions regarding the effectiveness of online classes for the different components of the language course (orals, grammar, civilization, literature). This was done by asking participants to indicate their level of agreement with the following statement: Online learning is only useful for certain language courses. The majority of participants (38.6%) disagreed with the statement, 36.5% agreed whereas 24.9% were undecided. Figure 13 presents the findings across languages.



**Figure 13:** Participants' perceptions regarding the usefulness of online learning for individual foreign language courses.

### Summary and Discussion

The present study sought to examine the (new) methods applied in the teaching of foreign languages at the research setting during the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis of the data showed that students generally preferred F2F lessons over online lessons. Nonetheless, quite a number of participants acknowledged the benefits of Online Foreign Language Learning and highlighted their preference for the use of Zoom and videos during the period. Regarding the online platform used by lecturers, the data showed that Zoom was employed more frequently than the University eLearning platform—SAKAI. The findings suggest that students' preference for these modes of online language education is an indication of the interconnection between FLL and FLCA.

The authors also investigated the challenges encountered by students during the era and the impact of students' experiences and perceptions on their learning of foreign languages. The

findings showed that the majority of participants did experience some major difficulties during the COVID-19 online classes. The most significant of them were internet connectivity, problems with the flow of communication and difficulties in adjusting to the *new normal*. In line with this, participants did not consider OFLL as less challenging than F2F ones. However, the study also found that OFLL methods (e.g., Zoom) provoked lesser levels of anxiety among students than the traditional in-person pedagogical approaches of assessment. A participant affirmed:

### **Extract 3**

“I feel more comfortable, I wouldn’t have to be face to face with anyone to be very scared to talk all the time... when it’s online I’m able to think thoroughly before answering and I get it right”.  
(Spanish and French, 21-23, Female, L100, Self-rating: poor)

Another acknowledged: “I feel the online helped reduce anxiety” (18-20, L200, French, Male, Self-rating: very good). Our participants’ views confirmed the observation of Horwitz et al. (1986) that FLL is a highly anxiety-provoking experience for learners since it produces “tension” and “pressure” and has a debilitating effect on learners’ performance. These responses from students also reflect the observations in Goertler and Gacs (2018) that online studies do have a minor advantage over face-to-face classes in a classroom. The following quotation gives a clear illustration of the positive impact of OFLL approaches on students’ perceptions and their learning of languages. In contrast, it also highlights the disadvantages of F2F approaches in FLL.

### **Extract 4**

“During the online studies last semester, I had enough time and comfort to even think and plan my orals and every other exam and these face-to-face lectures

did absolutely bad to me this semester. Complete F in both Spanish courses. I know I am not an A student but I'm not an F or even an E student. I'm very disappointed, which is making me drop Spanish next semester. I can't continue getting grades I don't deserve... I don't remember making any mistake in my summary because the only passage I learnt is the passage I chose ... I'm so heartbroken since yesterday and I won't let this continue. I'm done with languages" (Female, Spanish and French, L100, 21-23, Self-rating: poor)

For the face to face, most of the time you're nervous; the face-to-face orals can bring anxiety because of the lecturer. He may not be so patient with you enough. (21-23, L400, Chinese, Female, Self-rating: fair)

Apart from the issue of anxiety, participants also acknowledged the advantage of accessibility: "It is easy and comfortable because you can do it anywhere you find yourself but with face to face you have to always come for class from home and others" (24-25, L300, Chinese, Female, Self-rating: good).

On the other hand, participants who highlighted the disadvantages of OFLL listed the following as reasons: boredom, need for better student-lecturer and student-student interaction in the foreign language, inadequate time span for the semester, need for a slower pace of teaching, problems with internet connectivity and its influence on effective communication, etc. Interestingly, a very low number of participants expressed challenges with a lack of access to computers. Sample comments from participants are presented in Extract 5.

## **Extract 5**

“Languages should really be taught in person. Learning it online was so boring and not profitable” (18-20, L100, Spanish & French, Self-rating: very good).

“With face-to-face class you can get the chance of clearing all your doubts as in the case of misunderstanding, during the lecture with the lecturer or even your colleagues” (21-23, L200, Chinese, Female, Self-rating: good).

“Because you can hear the sound coming from the lecturer very well when looking at his or her mouth directly” (21-23, L100, Russian, Male, Self-rating: poor).

“I am able to hear the pronunciation better, no distractions (internet disruption of online class) and I am able to interact with the lecturer” (18-20, L200, Russian, Female, Self-rating: fair).

“You get to express yourself in class and also where you don’t understand you can clearly seek for help from the lecturer or your colleagues” (24-25, L400, Chinese, Male, Self-rating: good).

“It makes [it] very easy for me to understand what is being taught and to ask questions to my satisfaction but with the online even if I don’t understand I don’t know how to express myself for the lecturer to get me” (21-23, L200, Russian, Female, Self-rating: very good).

“With the face-to-face, the lecturer is able to hear your pronunciation of the words and he is able to correct you. It’s more interactive as some students do not participate in the online class” (21-23, L300,

Arabic, Female, Self-rating: excellent).

“Face-to-face and interaction in class is the best mode for learning a foreign language because you’ll be corrected at that moment if you made a mistake” (18-20, L300, Russian, Male, Self-rating: good).

“To some extent the face-to-face is helpful because you are able to speak and follow as the class goes on. But for the online, learning on my own is somewhat difficult because there is nothing to motivate you to do so” (21-23, L300, Chinese, Female, Self-rating: good).

“I wish they would consider students with ADHD. Online classes are practically useless to me. I always have to ask others what the class was about even though I join it. Face-to-face is way better” (21-23, L300, Spanish & French, Female, Self-rating: good).

In her much-cited work, Dhawan (2020) noted time flexibility, location flexibility, catering to a wide audience, wide availability of courses and content, and immediate feedback as part of the strengths of online education. Responses given in the current study, however, show that while the first four benefits listed are pertinent to our research context, on the contrary, in the case of OFLL, participants rather considered *lack* of immediate feedback as a disadvantage of online education. On the other hand, the quotations in Extract 5 above support Dhawan’s assertion that technical difficulties, learner’s capability and confidence level, time management, distractions, frustration, anxiety and confusion, and lack of personal/physical attention are weaknesses of online education. A participant affirmed: “Please we are pleading if online studies for languages can be abolished;

it is really killing us” (18-20, L100, Chinese, Male, Self-rating: fair). Moreover, the data sometimes showed a general frustration among students. The following extracts reflect the participants’ frustration with foreign language learning (in general) and show that this general frustration was worsened by the OFLL modes of delivery during the pandemic.

### **Extract 6**

“The lecturers in the language department should know that the languages are not our dialect; even our local dialects we sometimes have issues so they should sometimes take their time in marking because the failing is too much meanwhile people put in a lot of effort just to learn a language, but they don’t feel that pain and the struggles we go through just to put some words down. In summary, it’s not easy to adapt to a language you knew nothing about” (18-20, L100, Spanish & French, Female, Self-rating: poor).

“I understand that we don’t have time to go through the basics, but language is something we can’t rush. I feel everything is rushed. I know I have to study after class, but language isn’t all I have to do after class. There are other courses that require my attention. I feel the lecturers should slow down a bit as well” (18-20, L200, Spanish, Female, Self-rating: fair).

The above comments emphasize the importance of teachers’ adequate mastery of distance learning pedagogies and the best methods for foreign language teaching in general. Fortunately, this was achieved in some cases: “Some of the language courses have adjusted beautifully to the online mode of learning but other courses require an in-person class for proper interaction” (21-23, L200, Spanish & French, Male, Self-rating: good); “Although it was not easy teaching a language online,



... they (lecturers) did very well and I must [say] I appreciate their efforts” (18-20, L100, Arabic, Female, Self-rating: fair). Given the fact that the current study did not focus on teachers’ approaches, it would be beneficial to have further studies that address the issue from that perspective.

Interestingly, the analysis of the data showed that most of the participants from all the language groups did enjoy their foreign language lessons *in general* and were not negatively affected by the mistakes they made in class. In contrast, the situation was different during the COVID-19 era as the majority said they did not enjoy their OFLL. It is, however, important to note that for some languages, there was only a slight difference between the number of students who had positive emotions about OFLL and those who did not. This finding is significant because as MacIntyre (2012) notes, positive emotions, of which FLE can be identified as an example, have several advantages. Firstly, positive emotions increase individuals’ attention and thinking and eventually enable new learning. Secondly, positive emotions also mitigate the lingering effects of negative emotional arousal (e.g., FLCA). Thirdly, positive emotions boost resilience by generating beneficial reactions to stressful events. And in the fourth place, positive emotions foster social bonds built by smiles and intellectual resources. Participants’ FLE could therefore be identified as a coping strategy that shielded them from the already stressful and anxiety-filled context of the ongoing pandemic.

Furthermore, although many participants had not observed an improvement in their academic performance during the OFLL, there was only a slight difference between the number of participants who confirmed they had and those who indicated otherwise. This suggests that the online foreign language classes could have had a more positive impact had there been fewer issues or challenges during the period (see Extract 5).

Finally, the study has advanced the understanding of the value of online education in the teaching and learning of all

foreign language subjects. The results suggest that participants did not believe that OFLL was more appropriate for some language subjects than others. This suggests that online classes can be effective in the absence of challenges irrespective of whether it is a philology program or a purely language course. The authors do acknowledge that there is a limitation to the study in that direct reference to each component (e.g., orals, literature) was not made in framing the question. Richer data would have been obtained if the different subjects were listed for participants to show their level of agreement with the effectiveness of online learning for each subject. However, this is mitigated by the fact that participants did make direct reference to specific subjects in their comments. Their responses in the open-ended section of the questionnaire showed a greater focus on orals (“I think oral class and exams for most language courses should be done in person and not online” [21-23, L200, Spanish & French, Female, Self-rating: fair]). In some cases, general comments were also made to cover all the subjects. One participant concluded: “Overall, I would love to redo all my classes online” (21-23, L400, Chinese, Male, Self-rating: fair).

The study showed that more effort needs to be put into improving the University’s online learning platform: “SAKAI is my MAIN headache... It should be worked on for effective work submission” (18-20, L100, Spanish & French, Female, Self-rating: good). Most importantly, training sessions should be provided to both students and lecturers on its usage. As one participant put it: “We haven’t yet fully grasped the understanding of online teaching; systems must be put in place so such problems will not be encountered” (21-23, Postgraduate, Spanish, Male, Self-rating: good).

Dhawan (2020) lists the arguments provided in support of online pedagogy as accessibility, affordability, flexibility, learning pedagogy, life-long learning, and policy. Of these, accessibility, flexibility, life-long learning, and effective learning were the factors most emphasized by participants. As

one participant expressed it: “Education has adapted to a new era, and it is good. At least in case of lockdown, education can still thrive” (24-25, Recently graduated, Russian, Male, Self-rating: excellent). Others stated:

### **Extract 7**

“SAKAI has to become more reliable, and the use of online teaching has to be incorporated into our education and must become normal because this pandemic has taught us how important technology and online tools are to our education and to be able to fit into this digitalized world”. (24-25, Recently graduated, Spanish & French, Female, Self-rating: very good)

“It was a new challenge and we gladly embraced it (24-25, Recently graduated, Chinese, Male, Self-rating: very good).

The findings of the present study confirm Dhawan’s argument that merging F2F lectures with technology provides a learning environment which “can increase the learning potential of the students” and enable them to “learn anytime and anywhere, thereby developing new skills in the process leading to life-long learning” (Dhawan, 2020, p. 6).

### **Conclusions and Future Directions**

Online education poses a lot of challenges for language programs. This is especially so for foreign language education, where (adult) students learn a subject whose contents as well as form are novel for them. The challenges inherent in OFLL are a result of the fundamental function of language which serves as a tool for communication. Several pragmatic factors – both linguistic as well as extra-linguistic factors – come into play for successful communication to take place. Extra-linguistic factors such as non-verbal expressions (e.g., facial expressions, body

language), physical context or location (e.g., classroom, home), and disruptions (e.g., noise) can significantly impact efforts to communicate successfully.

The current study on OFLL during the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that issues with technology, such as bad internet connectivity and lack of adequate digital skills, can derail students' foreign language enjoyment and motivation. Notwithstanding, the study has also shown that OFLL offers certain advantages which seem to outweigh its disadvantages, namely the improvement of self-confidence and the mitigation of foreign language anxiety. Consequently, given the impact of students' attitudes or emotional variables on their FLL experience as well as the other advantages of OFLL, vital lessons learnt from the crisis-prompted online education show that blended OFLL can be used effectively for all foreign language subjects if well managed and strategized. It is therefore necessary that educational institutions resolve the pedagogical, logistical, and technological challenges that both learners and teachers encounter. The resolution of the challenges identified in this research could enhance sustainable FL learning by means of technology. Adequate investment should be made in efficient online management software as well as digital training programs for students and teachers in a bid to alleviate the downsides of OFLL and enhance learners' success of learning a new language even beyond times of crisis.

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