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Difficulties in Listening and Speaking in French Language Learning: The Strategies Adopted by Aviation Department Students

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Abstract

This study handles how aviation students learn French as a second foreign language, focusing on difficulties in listening and speaking skills, and the factors behind them. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 Aviation Managements students, selected through purposive sampling, using a qualitative case study design. Each interview lasted for 40-50 minutes, and the data were analyzed descriptively. Findings revealed that students' motivation was primarily based on external factors, such as compulsory courses and career goals, but internal factors like cultural interest, were constantly developed. Anxiety in speaking, fear of making mistakes, pronunciation difficulties, and a mismatched reduced communication desire. In listening skills, speech speed and spelling-pronunciation differences stood out. The participants implemented various strategies, such as repetition and imitation, subtitled media, self-recording, peer practice, and digital applications. French was considered more concerning than English due to later and limited exposure and phonetic complexity. This study suggests pronunciation workshops, authentic materials, fault-tolerant and technology-enhanced classrooms.

Keywords: *French language learning, listening and speaking skills, motivation and anxiety, second foreign language*

1. Introduction

Learning a foreign language has become essential for people's academic, professional, and personal development in today's world of growing globalization. Although English is the most often used language in international communication, many students utilize it as their primary foreign language. However, learning a second foreign language involves a variety of motivational, cognitive, and cultural elements. Although this study refers to French as a "second foreign language" because students learn it after English, this terminology may be consistent with the learning setting described as "L3" or "additional language" learning setting. The goal of teaching French as a second language in higher education is to develop students' language proficiency as well as their cultural awareness and capacity for strategic learning. However, when learning a second foreign language, students frequently face many difficulties pertaining to motivation, anxiety, learning techniques, and cultural ties (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011).

It is acknowledged that motivation is one of the main factors affecting success in learning a foreign language. According to Gardner (1985, p. 10), learners' readiness and eagerness to acquire the language, as well as their motivational intensity, are components of foreign language motivation. Motivational dynamics in second-language acquisition are often different from those in first-language acquisition. Winke (2005) emphasizes the importance of instrumental and integrative motivation styles in this process. Therefore, learning second foreign languages like French may be more strongly motivated by cultural curiosity or integrative types of motivation, whereas learning English can be mostly explained by instrumental motivation linked to academic and professional aims.

On the other hand, anxiety is just as important as motivation in the emotional aspects of learning a foreign language. Therefore, according to Berber and Kuru Gönen (2017), “anxiety appears as an instrumental figure in determining students’ success or failure in FL classes” (p. 91). It has a negative impact on students’ performance results in addition to reducing their active use of the target language. According to Zheng and Cheng (2018), students’ listening and speaking abilities are the main areas where they reported feeling anxious about learning a foreign language. Their findings show that some students feel anxiety while speaking English in class because of the fear of making mistakes, and some others get nervous since they cannot control their speech speed and word selection during listening. Depending on this, it is considered that foreign language anxiety focuses especially on verbal communication skills and that speaking and listening skills constitute anxiety by affecting each other mutually. Within this context, it is expected that students may experience more anxiety during the process of learning French than during the process of learning English, given extensive familiarity with and exposure to English.

In relevant literature, speaking and listening skills are considered as fundamental components of communicative competence in foreign language teaching. Yu (2021) suggests that listening is a versatile skill that includes the processes such as word recognition, vocal distinction, analysis of grammatical structure, and building meaning context-based. Research has shown that speaking and listening are interdependent skills, which should be taken into account while developing a communication strategy (Maulana et al., 2020; Newton & Nation, 2020). Furthermore, research has revealed that learners of a foreign language face various emotional and cognitive challenges in speaking and listening skills. The most common challenges are performance anxiety and fear of making mistakes during speaking, speaking speed and discursive features in listening phase. Although most of these studies focus on English, empirical research on the cognitive and emotional aspects of speaking and listening skills in the context of learning French as a second foreign language is still relatively limited, which has remained under-researched.

This study handles listening and comprehending skills not only as an ability limited to having vocabulary knowledge and knowing linguistic structures, but also a versatile ability which includes several tasks such as following speaking speed, differentiating sounds, forming meaningful wholes, and processing information even under cognitive load. The study also evaluates speaking ability, as well as fluency, pronunciation, self-expression, and communication anxiety. Both skills interchangeably affect each other due to their common cognitive and emotional fundamentals.

Learning a language includes not only acquiring vocabulary knowledge and grammar, but also a direct connection with the culture of that language. Language learning requires internalizing the cultural essence, as well as improving language proficiency. Students’ educational experiences improve, and their language proficiency increases when they comprehend the culture of the target language group (Singh, 2024: 433). The bond that students form with the target language’s culture is a significant factor in their desire for learning it. Individual learning styles may be a determining factor in this process, though, as evidenced by the fact that some students do not give cultural elements priority.

To overcome the difficulties, they face when learning a foreign language, students use a variety of tactics. Oxford (1990) distinguished between two types of language acquisition

strategies: direct and indirect. Approaches where students engage directly with the language are referred to as direct (or explicit) techniques. These methods, which include vocabulary memorization, mental processing of linguistic information, recall, and methods to deal with imperfect knowledge (memory, cognitive, and gap-filling strategies), are intended to use and process the language directly. Instead of dealing directly with language, indirect (or supportive) strategies help students learn through indirect means, like controlling learning, controlling emotions, staying motivated, or promoting learning through social interaction (metacognitive, affective, and social strategies). According to Xu et al. (2022), students use a variety of techniques, including self-evaluation, time management, imitation, and individual practice, but these techniques do not always provide the same level of results. In actuality, methods that are effective for learning English may not always yield comparable results in phonetically and structurally different languages like French.

Roussel, Tricot, & Sweller (2022) found that students' exposure to academic knowledge exclusively through a second language may limit the learning process within the context of Cognitive Load Theory. Thus, the efficacy of students' techniques is limited by the cognitive difficulties they encounter when learning French. In a similar vein, Ozawa et al. (2024) suggest that the difficulty level of French listening materials cannot be explained by linguistic content alone, but also the prosodic variables such as speaking speed, fluency, and discourse manner have determinant roles; however, they state that these factors are not sufficient alone, but more effective together with linguistic elements. These findings reveal that the cognitive and prosodic difficulties encountered by the students learning French require strategic adaptation.

English is a foreign language which is experienced by students earlier and more commonly since it is globally common and can be acquired at earlier ages. Being exposed to English at an earlier age supports students' motivation and reduces anxiety about learning a foreign language. French, on the contrary, is a language learnt as a second foreign language at university level, and it is exposed less compared to English. This fact may limit the effectiveness of the strategies used by the students by increasing their anxiety level.

Within this theoretical and contextual framework, this study aims to seek the relationship among emotional components, such as motivation and anxiety, the difficulties students have in speaking and listening, and the learning strategies they prefer. Cognitive Load Theory acknowledges that the working memory of students is strained in challenging learning activities like speaking and listening while learning a second foreign language like French. Performance and learning outcomes are considerably affected by this (Sweller, Kirschner, & Clark, 2006). In this scenario, students' learning strategies are seen as attempt to manage the excessive emotional and cognitive load.

This study aims to analyze the experiences of the students studying at the Department of Aviation Management who are learning French as a second foreign language. This study addresses the difficulties faced especially in listening and speaking skills, and motivation, anxiety, cultural awareness, and learning strategies underlying these difficulties. It is also aimed at identifying the similarities and differences in the dynamics of learning the two languages by comparing the learning process of English with that of French.

This study seeks answers to the following questions:

1. What are the motivations and anxieties of the aviation students towards learning French and how does this differ from their experience of learning English?
2. What kind of difficulties do the students face in speaking, listening, and understanding while learning French, and how do they overcome these difficulties?
3. How do cultural awareness and the use of digital resources contribute to students' French learning processes?
4. How does learning French affect students' vocational objectives and career development?

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

The design of this study is based on a theoretical framework that draws on theories of motivation and anxiety, learning strategy research, and cognitive load theory, which guides both the data collection and interpretation processes. Within this context, this study was designed and implemented as a qualitative one. The main reason for choosing a qualitative design was to acquire rich, detailed data that enable an in-depth understanding and analysis of multidimensional aspects of the research topic (Queirós et al., 2017). Therefore, this study was conducted as a qualitative case study, which allows researchers to obtain accurate and reliable information about a specific topic in real-life contexts by yielding more comprehensive findings through its in-depth investigation, compared with quantitative methods (Creswell, 2013).

2.2. Setting and the Participants

This study employed purposeful sampling to identify participants most relevant to the research topic and able to provide rich data. Therefore, the participants in this study were 15 third-year students enrolled in a French course delivered 8 hours per week at the Department of Civil Aviation Management in the School of Civil Aviation at Erzincan Binali Yıldırım University, Türkiye. The lesson content was based on the coursebook, *La Classe A1*, which followed a task-based approach, and was designed for the A1 proficiency level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). In the reporting process, participants' personal information was kept confidential, and each participant was anonymized using codes P1, P2, P3, and so on.

2.3. Data Collection Tools

The data of the study were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview questions were generated from the research problem and related literature and were then reviewed by field experts experienced in qualitative research methodology for content and scope validity. The interview was revised according to the experts' feedback.

A pilot study was carried out to evaluate the clarity of the questions, and necessary revisions were made. The 13 open-ended questions allowed the participants to feel free to express themselves. Students were asked to give consent to participate in the interviews. Each interview

lasted almost 40-50 minutes and the audio of the interviews was recorded. During the interviews, the researcher took field notes and held an objective approach not to influence participants' responses.

The interviews were conducted using similar instructions to support the credibility of the data collection tool. The researcher interviewed the participants in quiet settings at a suitable time for them to feel comfortable answering the questions.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out in a systematic, multi-stage manner. Firstly, to analyse data, the participants' responses were transcribed and read carefully to be able to better understand it. Then the data was analysed by using inductive content analysis. During the initial coding stage, semantic units were defined from participants' responses and the study's theoretical framework. Initial codes were generated to account for key concepts. These key concepts are motivation, anxiety, listening and speaking skills, cognitive load, and learning strategies. The initial codes generated from these concepts were later brought together to be able to constitute broader themes, such as cognitive, affective and strategic aspects of additional language learning. During the data analysis, the researcher revisited the coded data whenever necessary to be able to prevent subjective interpretation. Finally, the themes were reviewed and refined through continuous comparison with the interview data to ensure alignment with the research questions and theoretical framework.

Table 1 presents an overview of the main themes and selected sub-themes, along with representative codes. Detailed explanations of these themes, supported by participant responses, are provided in the Findings section.

Table 1. Overview of Themes, Sub-themes, and Representative Codes

Theme	Sub-themes	Representative Codes
Motivation and Attitudes	Academic/Professional motivation; Intrinsic interest	compulsory course; career advantage; liking the sound of French
Challenges Encountered	Speaking fluency; Pronunciation; Listening difficulties	word retrieval problems; silent letters; fast speech
Strategies and Approaches	Repetition and imitation; Use of media; Social practice	repeating audio; subtitled videos; practicing with peers
Digital Resources	Online platforms; Audio-visual input	Duolingo; podcasts; YouTube
English in Comparison	Motivation; Anxiety; Exposure	early exposure to English; higher anxiety in French
Professional Goals	Career differentiation; Employability	advantages in the aviation sector; international job opportunities

2.5. Ethical Principles

The study was carried out in parallel with the principles of research and publication ethics. Ethical approval was obtained from the Erzincan Binali Yıldırım University Educational Sciences Ethics Committee (Date: December 27, 2024; Approval No: E-88012460-050.04-416067).

Before the interviews, participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the principles of voluntary participation were outlined, and it was stated that the data would be kept confidential. Subsequently, written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

3. Findings

This section is structured within the framework of the research questions mentioned earlier and under certain thematic categories attained through the qualitative analysis. Each theme refers to one and/or more research questions and demonstrates the strategic, cognitive, affective aspects of learning French as a second foreign language.

3.1. Motivation and Attitudes

This theme mainly deals with the first research question by examining the participants' motivations and anxieties related to learning French and their perceptions of French by comparison with English. It also emphasizes the link between students' motivation and vocational goals. Therefore, it can be said that it also refers to the fourth research question.

3.1.1. Motivation

The participants' motivations to learn French are mainly organized under academic requirements, professional objectives, and cultural interests. Some participants (n=8) reported that they started to learn it as it was a compulsory course. To give an example, one of the participants (P3) stressed the academic requirement to learn French and stated that "*I am studying French as it is a compulsory course in my department. In fact, I am much more interested in English than French.*" On the contrary, a few students (n=4) reported seeing it as a language of opportunity. By accentuating the professional relevance of French, one of the participants (P5) noted that "*A person having a good command of French can find a job overseas more easily, and this is a real advantage in the sector.*" Also, motivational factors, such as intrinsic motivation and aesthetic appreciation, were further determined. One participant (P8) pointed out the interest he/she has in French and noted that "*As for me, French sounds melodic and gives me a sense of elegance when compared to English.*" However, very few participants (n=2) addressed their limited motivation for French. One of them (P6) clearly specified that "*Learning English was fun for me, but French is not. I just study French, as I must pass my exams.*" This suggests that the acquisition of French is significantly constrained by academic requirements or professional needs at the university level whereas learning English begins at earlier ages and in various social contexts. This indeed turns out to be a determining factor in affecting the nature and sustainability of the participants' motivation.

3.1.2. State of Anxiety

The results uncovered that the majority experienced anxiety while listening and speaking. The participants stressed that they experienced stress mainly because of concerns about difficulty

in retrieving words, challenges with achieving correct pronunciation, and mistakes in class, which decreased their willingness to communicate or participate in communication. One of the participants (P15), for example, noted that *“I want to speak, but I hold myself back for fear of saying something incorrect.”* In parallel, their concern about instructors or classmates’ negative judgment leads to anxiety, particularly in in-class activities, which include reading aloud or giving spontaneous answers. The participant (P8) reported that *“I do not have a lot of problems in listening, yet I am aware of the fact that my voice trembles when I speak,”* implying that this anxiety is also physiologically experienced.

3.1.3. Professional Goals

Most students (n=10) reported that being a proficient listener and speaker in French provides an advantage in job applications, because proficiency in French is regarded as a significant opportunity in multilingual contexts like aviation, as clearly pointed out by one of the participants (P4) stating that *“If I am able to speak French, I will be prioritized in cabin crew selections abroad.”* However, it is crucial to note that English still holds the primary position of being the language of communication when compared to French which is regarded as a secondary competence. The participant (P11) reported that *“It is already necessary to learn English, but French can give me an advantage over other candidates.”* In addition to professional goals, several participants (n=4) stated that personal development was also important in learning French. The participants noted that proficiency in French enhanced further self-assurance and multilingual competence serving a positive function in personal development. Nevertheless, some participants (n=5) drew attention to the fact that proficiency in French was compelling, implying that the participants need to put more effort in it.

3.1.4. French Culture

This study also concentrated on the participants’ interests in French culture, as well as the effect of cultural outputs on learning French. Many of the participants (n=11) specified that they showed interest to French music, films, cuisine, and lifestyle after having begun to learn the language. This is exemplified by one participant (P3), *“Learning French attracted my interest in the culture as well, and I got more interested in the language, particularly through films and music.”* Addressing the significance of learning a language culturally, a great number of participants (n=9) reported that their interests in cultural elements positively affected the use of vocabulary and structures, as highlighted by the participant (P7), stating, *“Understanding the lyrics of a song makes me feel better and I feel like I am part of that language.”* However, a few participants (n=3) reported that they did not have a particular interest in French culture and got familiar with it only through the content of the course. One of these participants (P15) stated that *“I did not focus much on the cultural aspect. To me, grammar was more crucial.”* In addition, some of the participants (n=3) emphasized the positive contribution of familiarity with Francophone countries, such as Canada, Belgium, and Africa, in addition to France, to their language practice. These participants underlined the positive role of being exposed to different accents in enhancing their listening proficiency.

It is noteworthy to indicate that most participants (n=10) had a growing interest in the culture while learning French. Most of them began to give more importance to the language due to

their curiosity in cultural products, such as music, cinema, and literature. As for some (n=3), this helped them contextualize the language more expressively and strengthened the use of language knowledge. Cultural context that boosted the participants' motivation was then proved to be an emotional dimension in their learning process. However, very few participants (n=2) attached less importance to cultural content, demonstrating that the participants employed a great variety of approaches on the basis of both their personal interests and learning styles.

3.1.5. Challenges

This theme refers to the second research question of the study, and it also explores the challenges that the participants encounter both in speaking and listening skills.

The analysis on the participants' speaking practice indicated that most participants (n=12) experienced problems, especially with fluency. As the participants have insufficient speaking practice, they reported having trouble in vocabulary, correct use of pronunciation, and construction of sentences. One of the participants (P2) remarked, *"I know a few words; however, I cannot remember the words I know at the time of speaking, so I get stuck."* This emphasizes the setbacks in oral communication.

Pronunciation was an additional challenge specified by the participants, owing to differences between French pronunciation and orthography, as well as the abundance of nasal sounds in French. For instance, the participant (P7) clearly indicated the effect of these challenges on their self-assurance, stating that *"Some letters are not pronounced as they are written, and I feel awkward when trying try to say them."*

Additionally, this study found that utilizing grammar rules automatically at the time of speaking affects fluency in communication. As one of the participants (P10) stated, *"While trying to make a sentence, I focus on the verb conjugation and end up losing too much time,"* the inadequate internalization of grammatical structures breaks the speech flow. Furthermore, several participants (n=7) highlighted the relationship between weaknesses in listening proficiency and their speaking performance. By stating, *"If I have difficulty understanding spoken French, I also fail to produce it accurately,"* the participant (P4) demonstrated the significant impact that limitations in receptive skills have on productive abilities.

Likewise, the participants reported having similar difficulties during the development of French listening skills. The most frequent concern was the rapid pace in French. The rapid and linked articulation of words in the course of spontaneous speech makes identification of lexical boundaries difficult, as stated by one participant (P5) who stated that *"Words are joined together, and I am unable to identify their boundaries."*

It is more difficult for the participants to comprehend what is articulated due to the differences between written and spoken forms. They reported having problems with coupling the written forms of words/phrases with their spoken forms. The participant (P14) stated that *"I feel like I understand; however, I cannot stick the written form in my mind, as I do not know it,"* illustrating how this mismatch influences their listening skills. A few participants (n=3) also indicated that in-class activities alone were insufficient to improve their listening skills, owing to the very limited time for exposure to French in class.

3.2. Strategies and Approaches

This theme addresses the second research question by focusing on the strategies employed by the participants to manage and overcome difficulties in listening and speaking. It is also related to the third research question, given its emphasis on the use of digital resources and self-directed learning strategies.

3.2.1. Listening and Speaking Strategies

The participant strategies' for improving French listening and speaking skills were analyzed across five sub-themes.

Repetition and Imitation Method: A significant number of participants (n=11) noted that they improved their pronunciation through repetition of the audio content they listened to and imitation of their teachers or media sources, as exemplified by one of the participants (P8) as follows: *"Whenever I hear a word, I attempt to reproduce it right away."* They also reported that this method contributed to their improvement in fluency.

Using Media with Subtitle: Most of the participants (n=10) stated that watching movies and TV series with subtitles, and listening to songs helped them learn common language patterns and improve their listening ability. *"Watching videos with subtitles helped me both understand what I hear and quickly find what to say while speaking."* said the participant (P2).

Using Vocabulary Notebooks and Voice Recording: A subgroup of participants (n=6) developed the habit of note-taking and repeating the words newly learned, and they used voice recordings to evaluate and improve their pronunciation. The participant (P14) stated that *"I record my voice and I try to find out where I have made mistakes."* This approach stands out as an instrument to improve individual self-awareness.

Practicing with Friends through Communication- Conversations / Language Exchange: some of the participants (n=5) stated that they practiced in French through interaction with their classmates or international friends. They also reported that these social interactions contributed to developing their communicative skills. The participant (P5) stated, *"I had a friend with whom we spoke in French on WhatsApp, and this greatly contributed to my speaking skills."*

Strategies from Learning English: Most of the participants indicated that they applied the same approaches for French that they previously used for English. However, since they are structurally more complex, the effectiveness of these strategies remained limited in French. The participant (P6) emphasized the difference by stating: *"I learned English a lot just by listening, but in French, it is not possible in that way; it requires much more repetition."*

3.2.2. Self-Directed Learning Strategies

Strategies which were adopted by participants to be able to develop their listening and speaking skills were classified into four sub-themes. These sub-themes can be ordered as:

The first sub-theme is using autonomous oral practice. Several participants (n=8) mentioned that they enhanced their listening skills by using autonomous oral practice, such as repeating vocabulary and reading aloud. This approach was important for achieving accurate

pronunciation and vocabulary retention. Related to this, one of the participants (P15) stated that *“When I am at home alone, I read books aloud to learn the correct pronunciation of words.”*

The second one is regularly engaging with audio materials: Some participants (n=9) constantly listened to audio materials, such as podcasts, radio, music, and films in French. They reported that this practice helped them adapt to the sound structure of French and in this way they can recognize common phrases used in everyday conversations. One of these participants (P13) stated that *“I took up listening to French podcasts for ten minutes daily to get my ear used to the language.”*

The third sub-theme is using informal methods. Some participants (n=7) preferred to use informal methods like films, games, and music when learning English. However, during this time their French studies were more systematic and organized. This difference may result from two points. One of them is early, continuous exposure to English and the second one is the more complex structure of French. One of the participants (P1) explained this difference clearly by saying that *“I am already frequently exposed to English, whereas for French I exert extra effort, focusing especially on certain subjects.”*

The last sub-theme is using visual aids and taking notes while learning a second language. A small number of participants (n=5) talked about that using visual aids and taking notes to be able to highlight key points was helpful for them to learn a second language. Therefore, they saw this approach as an agent to develop their grammatical knowledge.

3.2.3. Teaching Methods

The teaching methods that participants found effective in speaking and listening classes were analyzed in four sub-themes.

Most of the participants (n=10) found the classes including active engagement more effective. They stated that pair and group work increased both self-confidence and practicing opportunities. One of the participants (P9) indicated the benefits by saying: *“When I practice with my friend, I am not afraid of making mistakes and can practice comfortably.”*

Listening-Focused Tasks and Video Integration: Some participants (n=7) expressed that listening tasks supported by audiovisual resources produced more permanent learning outcomes. For example, the participant (P7) clearly emphasized the contribution such kind of activities to language skills, by stating, *“I find it more effective when we watch a video first and then engage in discussion about it.”*

Structured Pronunciation and Sentences Pattern Exercises: Several participants (n=6) underlined that pronunciation-focused exercises and repeating frequently-used sentence patterns were an effective way to support and improve speaking fluency.

Using Authentic Materials and Real Life Connections: Some of the participants (n=5) stated that the classes including materials close to language in real life were not only more meaningful, but also motivating, and that they helped building bridges to the use of the language outside classroom.

3.2.4. Needs for Gaining Confidence

The methods to increase the confidence of the participants in their French language skills and their perspectives on supports were analyzed in four sub-themes.

Many participants (n=10) emphasized that practicing French in real-life situations would promote their confidence. They particularly appreciated unstructured conversation opportunities outside classroom. The participant (P6) stated by saying: *“Having a place to speak, for instance engaging in a conversation with someone outside the classroom, would help me adapt more.”*

Interaction with Native French Speakers: According to most of the participants (n=9), communicating with French speakers one-to-one or in small-group settings would increase their confidence in speaking. The participant (P5) suggested a pairing-based speaking approach, and stated that *“It would be very good for practice if we were matched with a French student.”*

More Interactive Lessons and Group Work: Several participants (n=6) stated that increasing in-class activities focused on speaking would improve their confidence. Techniques like role-playing, dialogue exercises, and group discussions were seen as ways to help the participants express themselves more easily. The participant (P15) specifically underlined *“I would feel more comfortable if our teacher encouraged us to speak more.”*

Handling Minor Errors in a Supportive Way: Some participants (n=5) emphasized that confidence could be increased if corrective feedback is supportive rather than judgmental. The participant (P13) clearly explained by saying: *“I want my errors corrected without much criticism, otherwise I am hesitant to speak.”*

3.2.5. Digital Resources and Tools

The views of the participants on digital resources used in learning French were analyzed in four sub-themes, especially focusing on listening and speaking skills.

Contribution to Listening Skills: Some participants (n=10) emphasized the benefits of digital materials specifically in terms of promoting their listening, comprehension, and pronunciation. These tools were determined to ease exposure to daily language. For example, the participant (P1) highlighted the authenticity of language input in digital materials and stated, *“When I come across everyday conversational language in videos, I learn words more easily.”*

Limited Contribution to Speaking Skills: Most of the participants (n=9) expressed that digital tools improved listening and comprehension skills considerably, but that they were limited in supporting speaking practice. This can be exemplified with the statement of the participant (P7) as: *“My listening skills improve, but speaking requires one-to-one practice; videos are not enough.”*

AI tools: Several participants (n=6) stated that AI-supported tools, like the ones providing feedback for pronunciation, helped them improve their speaking skills. For instance, the participant (P12) emphasized: *“I feel my pronunciation gets better while using applications that prompt me to repeat words aloud.”*

Digital Context: Some participants (n=5) observed that digital content did not coincide especially with the linguistic proficiency and this decreased their motivation, specifically when beginner-level materials were not sufficiently simplified.

3.3. English in Comparison

This theme handles the first research question, and it explains the participants' experiences of learning two languages, English and French, in a comparative way, especially focusing on motivation, anxiety, exposure, and learning strategies.

3.3.1. Level of Motivation

The findings of the study figured out that the participants had different experiences in learning French and English. However, they had an internal motivation towards learning English because they were exposed to English at an earlier age, primarily through games, digital content, and movies. For example, one of the participants (P1) stated that "*I started to learn English when I was a child by watching films and playing games, and I was motivated to learn it.*" On the other hand, learning French is mostly about cultural interest or an academic need. Therefore, it can be a new and unfamiliar effort for the participants. Overall, while English is accepted as an international language, French is considered to be a unique and respected language.

3.3.2. State of Anxiety

The anxiety of participants in English was mostly due to their early exposure to English at a younger age and its widespread use worldwide. Some participants even stated that the widespread use of English could increase their anxiety and fear of making mistakes. On the contrary, difficulties of pronunciation in French and the participants' unfamiliarity with learning French were identified as factors contributing to their anxiety.

3.3.3. Pronunciation and Phonetic Differences

The pronunciation and phonetic differences in English and French led to some worries for the participants. They accepted that English was easier to understand and comprehend, while they emphasized that French was more difficult to learn because of its silent letters, liaison, and nasal phonemes, which were also handled in the courses. Constant exposure to English improved the listening skills of the participants, and it contributed to their development in speaking and self-confidence. However, French required participants to have more cognitive load and make more effort, mainly due to its phonetic structure, which affected their speaking ability.

3.3.4. Learning Strategies

There were some common learning styles that the participants benefited from in both languages; listening to songs, watching movies and TV series, and repetition were among these. That said, natural exposure to English is enough to support the learning process, while learning French can require a more conscious approach. The methods embraced while learning English benefited from while learning French, but structural differences and complexities in French necessitated specific implementations.

3.3.5. Digital Resources

In terms of digital resources, the participants stated that various resources were available for them to practice in English, while there were limited options for French. Hence, they underlined that they needed to develop additional strategies or search for more resources to practice in French.

4. Discussion

The findings of the current study revealed that participants' French learning experiences have a rich and versatile nature. There are a number of significant factors which can play a role in shaping this process and effecting how participants learn French. These factors can be ordered as motivation, anxiety, learning strategies, and cultural considerations.

Most began learning French for reasons, such as their studies or job-related necessities. This shows that the main reason for their motivation to French was an external one. However, after they started to learn the language because of external factors, most of them began to develop intrinsic reasons of motivation, such as finding French aesthetic and pleasing, and being interested in the culture during their learning process. This supports the idea that although the starting motivator for second language learning may be external, internal motivators mentioned above may develop afterwards. As indicated by Winke (2005), typically, students' motivations demonstrate a complex interplay among three different types of motivation, being instrumental, integrative, and intrinsic. Further, the process-oriented model of motivation Dörnyei and Ottó (1998) indicates that motivation can start off being motivated primarily by either internal or external compulsions, but then develops into an intrinsic form of motivation as learners become involved with the aesthetic, cultural, and personal aspects of the target language.

The most significant challenges the participants experienced were probably anxiety-related, particularly with speaking and listening skills. Pronunciation challenges, occasional lapses in word retrieval, and fear of making mistakes constrained the participants' communicative intentions. In parallel, rapid speech flow and divergence between the written and spoken modalities led to an increase in cognitive load, hindering language production. This finding aligns with Zheng and Cheng's study (2018), which argues that foreign language anxiety is predominantly concentrated in speaking skills and that listening and speaking competencies interact reciprocally. In their study, they also reveal that the participants' foreign language anxiety, together with notable listening-related anxiety, is most prominent in speaking skills, and that the two competencies exert reciprocal effects on one another.

This study compares the learning processes of English and French, but it does not compare the two languages' pedagogical approaches or methods of instruction. To give the participants a contextual background that affected their perceptions of French as a second foreign language, English was included in this study. In other words, the English and French comparison in the study was not treated as an analytical variable; instead, it was treated as a contextual framework to help the participants make sense of their experiences. English learning at an early age with the help of natural exposure was both persistent and motivating, while learning French learning that started comparatively late was viewed as the reason for the increasing anxiety. As Wu (2023) argues, this can be clarified by the positive association between motivation and success, rather than the negative

link between anxiety and success in the context of language learning. Within these parameters, elements, such as age, exposure to natural settings, and the nature of the learning context, which were linked to cognitive and affective variables, such as perceived cognitive load, anxiety, and strategy use, can be seen as having a significant impact on shaping the participants' motivation and anxiety throughout the process of language learning.

The findings also revealed the fact that participants had different views about the English and French languages. While English was considered as a mean of communication and a major skill, French was seen as a prestigious and distinctive language. This gap illustrates the functional value of multilingualism in the participants' thoughts. At the same time, it means participants have some priorities regarding foreign languages.

The participants in this study used a range of learning strategies, such as individual repetition, imitation, using subtitles on audiovisual materials, and communicating with friends. However, the effectiveness of learning strategies used in English learning remained limited when they were used in French learning, suggesting modifying the strategy according to the structural features of the target language. According to Xu et al. (2022), the effectiveness of strategies differs based on the language and context. In certain instances, they only improve students' perceptions of their own abilities and have little effect on achievement objectives. Hanak & Al Zboun (2023) found that students who learn French face listening difficulties that arise from their inadequate vocabulary, rapid speech, and memory issues. To address these challenges, the participants used some strategies like taking notes, translating, identifying key ideas, and using real materials. However, these methods were not always successful, underscoring the need for language and context-specific modifications.

This study shows the important and mutual connection between language and culture. The participants who studied French had a greater interest in French culture and this interest increased their motivation. Moreover, it appears that real cultural resources, such as films, music, and literature, helped the participants develop and retain knowledge for a more extended period of time. In contrast, some participants stated that cultural materials were of little value, which shows the strong impact of individual learning patterns. This finding supports the findings of Roussel et al.'s study. According to this shared result, the interaction with content in a second language can cause too much cognitive burden and this burden may limit language learning. Nevertheless, the use of these real cultural materials can help activate the participants' motivation. Thus, it can be a balancing factor to that burden. Engaging with learning materials that are rich in culture and language can help reduce the cognitive burden and retain the learning. This is supported by Ozawa et al. (2024), who state that listening difficulty is not only caused by the language, but the structure and prosody as well. As a result, authentic cultural materials and resources help to add greater context to the language, which can reduce listening difficulty and improve retention.

Finally, this research found that participants' problems with learning French stemmed from both personal factors and their educational environment and society. Therefore, the data support the necessity for lecturers to foster classroom communication; establish a safe, supportive classroom climate to reduce anxiety; and incorporate culturally diverse content into the curriculum.

5. Limitation

This study has several limitations. First, the study was conducted with a small group of participants from a single department at a university, which may limit its generalizability across contexts. Second, the data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which rely on participants' subjective perceptions. Third, the data were collected from students' experiences and attitudes. As a result, it was not supported by other data sources, such as classroom observations, performance-based assessment, or teacher evaluations. Finally, it is important to note that the study results may apply only to a specific learning context in which French is taught as a second language within a particular program curriculum. Consequently, the results may be insufficient for broader generalizations.

6. Conclusion and Implications

The findings show that students' French learning experiences are affected by the contextual and structural features of the language, and affective and sociocultural elements, such as motivation, anxiety, learning strategies and cultural interests. The participants began the learning process primarily driven by extrinsic factors, such as academic requirements and career goals, but over time, they gained more intrinsic motivation through cultural elements. However, the students experienced more anxiety when they spoke and listened to French and their willingness to communicate decreased because of pronunciation difficulties and fear of making mistakes. Although students developed various learning strategies, the methods that were effective for learning English were not effective in French. Therefore, there is a need for more supportive instructional practices.

Findings show both similarities and differences in the learning process of the two languages. First, in both languages, students benefited from watching movies, listening to songs and engaging in digital content. They also used similar learning strategies, including repetition and imitation. However, as students engaged with English from very early ages through computer/mobile games, media and social interaction, these experiences had more lasting effects over time. On the other hand, students were exposed to French in formal settings, such as a university course. The phonetic difficulties, limited sources and less exposure in real life made students feel more anxious when they started learning French. In this context, the findings indicate that learning English is driven by natural exposure, whereas learning French is a conscious, effortful practice for students.

Participants also provided suggestions for the challenges they had in learning French. They highlighted the importance of creating opportunities to speak French outside the classroom, interacting with native French speakers, and increasing group work and role-play. They also noted that a more supportive teacher response to learning errors would motivate learners to build confidence in speaking French. In addition, digital tools and AI-based applications were seen as beneficial for improving pronunciation and listening skills. Therefore, participants suggest that such resources should be used more effectively.

This study shows that students learning French display different patterns of motivation, anxiety and learning strategies than those they use when learning English. Based on the research findings and participants' suggestions, the following recommendations can be made.

As students feel intense anxiety about pronunciation, structured pronunciation workshops supported by digital tools that enable voice tracking and immediate feedback can be beneficial. These practices can reduce anxiety in learning French. Problems with fast speech can be decreased in sessions that combine listening and speaking. After listening to the real audio recordings, students can create dialogues in small groups to support their learning.

Strategies that are effective in learning English, such as repetition, listening to songs and watching movies, may not produce the same results in French. For this reason, it may be helpful to adapt strategies by considering the structural differences between English and French. When teachers respond more supportively to small mistakes, students can feel more confident. Learning environments that allow errors, use small-group work and encourage students to take risks may be beneficial.

As students' interest in French culture can motivate them to learn French over time, including movies, music, literature and current topics in society, can be helpful. This can make language learning feel less academic and more connected to everyday life. Digital and AI-based applications can help with pronunciation and listening skills. Since students may feel unsure about which tools to use, teachers can guide them to suitable resources that match their proficiency levels and learning goals.

Further studies can use larger samples and biofeedback tools, such as heart rate or eye tracking, to measure students' anxiety in real time. Comparing face-to-face and digital settings can also help explain how motivation and anxiety vary across in different contexts.

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Plagiarism statement

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