

Foreign Language Learning Before and During the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of German

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Abstract

The study seeks to understand the efficacy of online learning in German in the Integrated Master of Arts programme at a Technical Institute in India. Performance of eleven students each of the 'pre-pandemic' and 'pandemic' batches was compared focusing on the role that listening comprehension plays in foreign language learning. The performance of the two batches of students did not differ significantly on Foreign Language (FL) proficiency. The respondents shared differing opinions about how their learning conditions affected the quality of listening during the class. The instructor pointed to the detrimental effects of the lack of the socio-affective learning component in acquiring FL proficiency, indicating its complexity in different contexts.

Keywords: Listening comprehension, foreign language learning, online learning, socio-affective

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic adversely affected the education of more than 95 per cent of learners worldwide (Perti, 2021). Innovative solutions like live broadcasting learning materials and synchronous and asynchronous tools were used to compensate for lost hours (Tam & El-Azar, 2020), which gave learners control over the learning conditions and pace (Li & Lalani, 2020).

This study examines the effect of online Foreign Language (FL) learning on proficiency in German in two batches of students (the 'pre-pandemic' and the 'pandemic') enrolled in the Integrated Master of Arts programme at a technical institute in India. The 'pre-pandemic'

batch attended most classes in a physical classroom and the 'pandemic' batch in a videoconferencing classroom. Interview was used to assess students' listening comprehension and the instructor's insights about the teaching-learning experience were also collected, and the findings and their implications are discussed.

Importance of Listening Comprehension in Language Learning

Listening comprehension is an active process where listeners discriminate between sounds, understand grammatical structures and vocabulary, interpret voice fluctuations, retain the information obtained and contextually interpret them (Vandergrift, 2007). Rankin (1928) notes that 42 per cent of an individual's communication is obtained through listening, whereas in schools it received only 8 per cent emphasis in language learning. Nevertheless, the importance ascribed to listening comprehension has increased significantly from near zero in the 1940s and 1950s over time (Morley, 1990).

Learners use bottom-up and top-down cognitive strategies in the initial language learning stages. In bottom-up strategies, they start with phonemes and progress to words and sentences to express ideas, concepts, and the relationship between them. In top-down strategies, learners rely on previous knowledge to process the text. The interactive reading model, developed by Rumelhart, applies to listening. It proposes the simultaneous occurrence of language processing at different levels and the interaction of phonological, semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic information (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005).

Learners also use metacognitive strategies and adapt the current learning strategy accordingly (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005; Oxford, 2001). Vandergrift (1997) believes that intermediate listeners use more metacognitive strategies than beginners while learning French as a second language.

Further, learners tend to employ socio-affective strategies when they learn a foreign language (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005). Long and Robinson (1998, as cited in Blake, 2000) observe that interaction increases input comprehensibility through language modifications, including simplification, elaboration, confirmation, and clarifications, giving FL learners the required negative evidence for sustained language development.

However, FL learners may face problems with listening comprehension. Learners' anxiety while listening is derived from communication apprehension, which in turn is derived from the learners' 'near conviction' about their difficulty understanding what is being communicated (Horwitz et al., 1986). Underwood (1989, cited in Oxford, 2017) classifies listening comprehension problems into needing more control over the speed of the speech, needing repetition but not getting it, limited vocabulary, inability to recognize signals in listening, interpret input or concentrate and having poor habits. Difficulty concentrating for prolonged periods, lack of alternative stimuli apart from lecturing and factors affecting the learner's physical well-being also affect listening comprehension (Flowerdew & Miller, 1992). Though these problems apply to a physical classroom, they are relevant to an online classroom but play out differently.

Online Learning and Listening Comprehension

Online Learning comprises learning environments like web-facilitated, hybrid or virtual classes, synchronous and asynchronous modes of instruction, technology like videoconferencing and other computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools to access information, collaborate, and interact online (Van Deusen-Scholl, 2015). Web-based technology increases listening comprehension (Roussel, 2011; Smidt and Hegelheimer, 2004) and videos, if they contain enough clues for the learners to process the information, improve listening comprehension (Rubin, 1990).

Hulstijn (2003) lists six strategies listening comprehension skills improvement: listening to the recording, asking oneself if they have understood the message, replaying the recording, revealing the audio's text, recognizing what has been understood and replaying the recording. Of these, the first two apply in physical classrooms, while the first three in online classrooms.

Yüce (2019) shows that almost 90 per cent of respondents, who are experienced online instructors, believe that online classes improve students' FL listening skills. However, Klimova (2021) comparing online with traditional learning notes that most learners experienced problems in listening. The inability to hear or be heard due to technical issues may

tempt learners to subtly alter their interaction with fellow learners and instructors, impacting their language proficiency (Sun, 2011).

Research Methodology

Participants

The study covers the performances and experiences of 11 'pre-pandemic' and the 11 'pandemic' students, enrolled in a five-year Integrated Master of Arts (MA) programme offered by a technical institute in India, who took up German I and II as core courses in their first year.

Students of the pre-pandemic batch learned German mostly before the pandemic in physical classrooms with physical textbooks corresponding to the A1 (for German I) and A2 (for German II) levels of language proficiency. Select audio and video clips from each chapter were played in class (either in the seminar hall or classroom), and the students were expected to access the rest at their own pace using CD-ROMs attached to the books or scanning the pages using an app.

The students of the pandemic batch learned German through Zoom, and were provided with digital copies of the A1 level textbook for German I. Only relevant portions from the A2 level textbook were covered because the number of instructional weeks was reduced from 14 to 7. Select audio and video files were played in class, and students were expected to access the rest at their own pace by clicking on the speaker or film symbol on the pages of their digital textbooks.

Grades were awarded to students of both batches based on their proficiency in German grammar, ability to form simple sentences and communication skills, which were tested through quizzes (short tests), speaking (group presentations for the 'pandemic batch') and end-semester exams. The composite grade is obtained after formative and summative assessments over the semester. In the Grade-Point Average (GPA) system, each grade carries a grade point, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Grades and Corresponding Grade Points in the Technical Institute

Grades	Grade Point
S	10
A	9
B	8

The Equation 1 for calculating the GPA is:

$$\frac{\sum_{i=1}^n (C_i \times GP_i)}{\sum_{i=1}^n C_i} \tag{1}$$

C_i : Credits obtained for the i^{th} course.

GP_i : Grade Point corresponding to grade received for the i^{th} course.

$\sum_{i=1}^n C_i$: Sum of credits of n courses.

German I and German II are nine-credit courses. Therefore, Equation 1 can be rewritten as:

$$\frac{(9 \times GP_{G1}) + (9 \times GP_{G2})}{18}$$

(or)

$$\frac{GP_{G1} + GP_{G2}}{2} \tag{2}$$

GP_{G1} : Grade Point for Grade obtained in German I

GP_{G2} : Grade Point for Grade obtained in German II

Listening comprehension was an integral part of the teaching-learning process and assessed through an interview of two respondents from each batch and the insights from the course instructor. The pre-pandemic batch attempted all evaluation components for German I and the first quiz of German II in person. Due to the pandemic, instead of the second quiz and the end-semester exam for German II, assignments were provided, while the speaking test was conducted through videoconferencing. The pandemic batch did assignments instead of exams for German I and was

evaluated based on assignments and a group presentation for German II. Questionnaires were circulated among both batches and 11 responses (for the grades) were obtained.

Data Analysis

The grades of the respondents of both batches were converted into GPAs using Equation 2 and the data from Table 1 to obtain Tables 2 and 3:

Table 2: *Grades and GPA of Respondents of Pre-Pandemic Batch*

Grades in German I	Grades in German II	GPA
A	A	9
B	A	8.5
A	A	9
A	S	9.5
S	S	10
A	A	9
B	S	9
S	S	10
A	A	9
A	S	9.5
S	S	10

Table 3: *Grades and GPA of Respondents of Pandemic Batch*

Grades in German I	Grades in German II	GPA
S	S	10
S	S	10
S	S	10
A	S	9.5
B	A	8.5

B	A	8.5
A	B	8.5
A	A	9
A	A	9
S	A	9.5
A	B	8.5

The mean and standard deviation of the GPAs of the two batches are mentioned in Table 4.

Table 4: Mean and Standard Deviation of the GPA of the Two Batches

	Pre-Pandemic Batch	Pandemic Batch
Mean	9.32	9.18
Standard Deviation	0.513	0.643

A one-tailed Student’s t-Test with a 95 per cent confidence interval (CI) and 20 degrees of freedom (*df*) was applied on the data in Table 4, to test for the presence of statistically significant difference in the average performance of the two batches:

$$H_0 (\mu_0 = \mu_1) \quad (\mu_0 = \text{Average GPA of the Pre-pandemic batch} \\ \mu_1 = \text{Average GPA of the Pandemic batch})$$

$$H_1 (\mu_0 < \mu_1)$$

$$t = 0.88227, p < 0.05, df 20, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.192, 0.472]$$

The difference between the average GPA of both batches is not significant at $p < 0.05$. Hence, H_0 is not rejected, and the average GPA of the two batches does not differ significantly.

Interviews - Learner’s Perspectives

Respondents 1 and 2 are from the pandemic batch, while respondents 3 and 4 are from the pre-pandemic batch. All respondents agreed that environmental distractions affected their listening comprehension:

My concentration during the classes considerably wavered..... So, I used to lock myself..... (Respondent 1)

.... I had [a] 50-50 chance of getting disturbed. So, I insulated myself.....
(Respondent 2).

The air-conditioned seminar hall made me sleepy..... I hardly listened to the class. (Respondent 3)

I often found myself shivering from the cold temperature of the seminar hall..... the damage [to listening] was already done. (Respondent 4)

Respondents 1 and 2 found the multimedia files were of good quality:

The sound quality of the recordings was discernible..... The audio functioned perfectly..... (Respondent 1)

The audio recordings and movie clips shown in class were of high quality....
(Respondent 2)

These respondents had their sound systems:

..... I used headphones. I used them to cancel out outdoor noise too.
(Respondent 1)

I used to listen to the audio with and without my headphones.
(Respondent 2)

Respondents 3 and 4 believed their listening comprehension was affected by their distance from the classrooms' sound systems:

The seminar hall had good sound systems....., and we were close to the speakers. So, I could understand the majority of what was played
(Respondent 3)

I preferred learning in the seminar hall to our classroom because we were closer to the speakers.....(Respondent 4)

Respondents 1 and 2 found the digital textbooks helpful:

The books came with features like accessing media files by clicking..... I used to listen to them quite often..... (Respondent 1)

Respondents 3 and 4 did not feel like using the multimedia files in their textbooks because of the difficulty accessing them:

After some time, I did not feel like listening to the audio That didn't help with my listening comprehension at all. (Respondent 3)

I slowly saw myself skipping audio and video-based exercises..... That proved to be bad for my ability to understand what was said.....
(Respondent 4)

Instructor's Perspective

The instructor pointed out the importance of the missing socio-affective component of learning:

..... The interaction in the class, the humour, the way people make mistakes, and learning from each other's mistakes are all important to the learning process. (M. Brahme, personal communication, June 15, 2022).

The instructor also pointed out that online learning allowed students to 'duck' attempts to get their language corrected:

Reasons like "mic problem"..... were readily available to learners who might not have been keen on reading..... it did not resolve the problem for me to get everyone to speak (M. Brahme, personal communication, June 15, 2022).

Discussion

The study affirms that online learning has provided the 'pandemic' batch with the opportunity to better their listening comprehension but did not necessarily improve their overall learning, which is reflected in the absence of statistically significant differences in the average performance of the two groups.

One of the causes is feedback disruption. As the instructor noted, some learners may have chosen not to respond to the requests to speak and correct themselves, constituting deliberate disruption. Others may not have had the required infrastructure to attend the classes without technical issues, comprising unintentional disruption. This leads to the lack of the socio-affective component of learning, where communicators are forced to 'imagine' their audience (Kieser et al., 1984). Online learning represents a dominant-passive type of interaction, characterized by low to moderate levels of equality and mutuality when applying Storch's (2002) classification of dyadic interactions, and sees the maximum number of missed opportunities for knowledge transfer.

Conclusion

The study aimed at understanding the impact of online learning on FL proficiency during the pandemic and found no difference in the average performance of the two batches. The learner's experience indicates that the absence of difference is attributable to the multidimensional factors

of foreign language learning in different contexts, including feedback disruption and lack of socio-affective elements.

Limitations

The hypotheses in the study have been tested with limited data collected, and the conclusions may change with an increase in the sample size. The cut-offs for the various grades for both batches can vary depending on the difficulty of the evaluation for both batches, as relative grading was followed.

Scope for Further Study

The paper provides a roadmap to compare the efficacy of online learning with classroom-based language learning and understand the efficacy of blended learning, which might become the new normal in language learning. Furthermore, it also offers pointers to how online learning might meaningfully complement classroom-based language learning.

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