Foreign Language Study in the "New Normal"

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ARTICLE INFORMATION

ABSTRACT

In the advent of "new normal" education, a term used to describe the notion of distance learning, Foreign Language (FL) classes faced a lot of changes in the pedagogy of FL education. To identify if these changes have affected the students' perceptions on their FL learning experiences, FL students were interviewed through autobiographies. Twenty four FL students were identified through snowball sampling and has reached data saturation. Through thematic analysis, the responses underwent open coding, axial coding, and selective coding where three themes were then identified: virtual classroom environment, teaching pedagogy, and drive and motivation which all round up to encapsulate to refer to both the FL teachers' management (in the virtual classroom, instruction, and interaction) and the FL students' self-management (self-regulation decisions, time flexibility, drive, and motivation). To ensure higher learning rates, there is a need to consider the FL teachers' virtual classroom management and the FL students' self-management.

Introduction

In the onset of COVID-19, the education sector began to embrace a "new normal" (Cahapay, 2020; Tumapon, 2020) which is used to encapsulate the concept of distance learning. This learning modality has been adapted by some Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) long before COVID-19. In fact, Zainuddin and Attaran (2015) highlight this modality as a shift from lecture-centered to student-centered instruction where students become active and interactive learners.

Some universities and institutions in the Philippines, on the other hand, are new to this set up. The global pandemic has abruptly forced these learning institutions to cope with its challenges and adapt flexible learning modalities (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020; Cahapay, 2020; Sintema, 2020) which then influenced a new appreciation for the merits of technology-based educational modalities among universities and policy makers. So with the need to apply innovative teaching strategies, teachers opted for various learning modalities such as uploading their

lessons online through different platforms like Google Classrooms, WebQuest, and other online sites (Toquero, 2020). Other modalities employed include modular, television-based, radio-based instruction, and blended learning.

Foreign Language classes in the Philippines are part of the college curriculum, and with the advent of the "new normal" education, these classes are not an exception to the aforementioned effects of pandemic. In fact, this "new normal" posed a lot of changes in the pedagogy of FL education. It is important to note that over the years, researches regarding FL classes were conducted and sprouted recommendations for FL teachers on the conduct of classes. Apparently, students' perceptions of their FL learning classroom experiences have important pedagogical and programmatic implications (Tse, 2000). Hence, there is a need to identify whether this "new normal" education brought changes to the students' perceptions toward FL. The results of this study will further help us determine the pedagogical implications of their perceptions on the modalities applied by "new normal" FL classes in the Philippines.

Tse's (2000) study, *Student Perceptions of Foreign Language Study: A Qualitative Analysis of Foreign Language Autobiographies*, presented results on the students' belief on their instruction, their level of proficiency, and their failures to their own lack of effort in the FL classroom. The participants in the said study, however, were students in a face-to-face FL classroom. Since HEIs are now aligning with the "new normal" set up, this study adapted Tse's (2020) qualitative analysis on the students' perceptions, but focused on the students enrolled in the "new normal" FL classes.

Furthermore, this study addressed the following questions:

1. What are the students' perceptions of the pedagogy used in FL courses in the "new normal"?

2. In the students' own view, how successful are they in acquiring the FL through the current modality employed?

3. To what or to whom do students attribute their level of achievement in learning the FL?

4. Would the students' perceptions toward FL classes change if their FL classes were done in a different learning modality?

Theoretical Background of the Study

Schumann's Cultural Introject Theory

This study is anchored on Schumann's Cultural Introject Theory which believes that the learner's level of target language culture introject influences the degree of language learning. This theory claims that the social distance between the language learner's native language and the target language, as well as the psychological distance, determined the cultural introject level; hence, the language acquisition.

In this study, the language learners learn through flexible learning modalities coursed through online and/or virtual classes. In line with the aforementioned theory, language learning is affected by both social and mental distance. Schumann further notes that the social distance element had a considerably larger role. The goal of language study is to study language use, which cannot be separated from the linguistic environment (including locutionary context, situation, and cultural context). However, because culture is an essential component of the linguistic environment, it is as relevant to the study of foreign languages. This notion is strengthened by Svanes (1987) when he

said that cultural distance was the greatest predictor of variation among groups of students from varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Furthermore, this theory posits that foreign language teachers must provide the learners with input in the language with a common style, and the language style input should be varied to educate the learner's language consciousness, and to make them employ the matching language style in diverse contexts to achieve language appropriateness (Zhao, 2008).

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design which focused on determining the whys and hows of the phenomena under consideration and made use of a data collection approach using autobiographies. Moreover, thematic analysis was used as the qualitative data analysis which focuses on discovering, analyzing, and interpreting meaning patterns in qualitative data through autobiographies with guide questions. A number of studies such as those by Allison (1998), Bailey and Ochsner (1983), Escalante and Kannan (2016), and Peck (1996) employed written self-reflections on an individual's language learning (Tse, 2000). According to Zeichner and Liston (2014) as cited by Escalante and Kannan (2016), the process of understanding must start from reflection on one's own experience (Zeichner & Liston, 2014). Thus, this study anchored on the idea that the students' self-perception on their FL experience and their perspective on their own capability to learn an FL have an attribution to their attainment in FL classrooms, further implicating their future decisions in FL studies.

Sampling Procedure and Participants

Through snowball sampling, 24 participants were chosen based on a criteria who then introduced other FL students to take part in this research study until data saturation (Naderifar, Goli & Ghaljaei, 2017).

The criteria include the following characteristics:

a. The participants are FL students (undergraduate, graduate or postgraduate);

b. The participants are currently enrolled in an FL course; and

c. The participants are Filipino by citizenship.

Instrument and Data Collection Procedure

As aforementioned, this study adapted Tse's (2000) Foreign Language Study entitled, "Student Perceptions of Foreign Language Study: A Qualitative Analysis of Foreign Language Autobiographies." This study, therefore, employed student autobiographies which is a form of data collection highlighted by Tse to have certain advantages than typical diaries or journal entries. The participants were asked to respond to ten open-ended questions regarding their FL study perceptions and experiences. These questions, adapted from Tse, were crafted to ensure that they provide a context (students' experience) and a sustained reflection (aspects of FL learning experience, i.e., desired level of proficiency, attributions of attainment, and affective/motivational issues) (Tse, 2000). The questions, however, were modified to suit the learning modality applied by FL classes in the "new normal".

The questionnaires were coursed through an online platform. Furthermore,

the participants were instructed to respond to all questions and were told that they can give particular emphasis to those questions which they felt were most relevant to their FL learning experiences. The participants were then asked to answer the questions in all honesty. Furthermore, the participants were made aware that the data will be used only for the purpose of this study and would not affect their grades in any way. The questions were as follows:

1. What language are you learning?

2. What were your reasons for studying this language?

3. What learning modality is employed by your FL teacher *(e.g. modular, television-based, radio-based instruction, blended, or online)?*

4. With the learning modality currently employed, what types of activities or lessons were used in your FL class?

5. What are some positive and negative aspects of studying a language this way?

6. How successful were you in acquiring the language through this modality?

7. What contributed to your success/lack of success? Why?

8. How do you feel about learning language as a result of these experiences?

9. Do you think you will have a different learning experience if your FL class was conducted in a traditional set-up like the face-to-face class? Why?

10. What would you change about language classes in the "new normal" to make them more effective?

Data Analysis

The participants' responses were analyzed thematically. All responses underwent a process: (1) open coding to establish labels based on the meaning that emerges from the data; (2) axial coding to recognize relationships among the open codes; and (3) selective coding to identify the core variable. Transcripts were reread to ensure that the core variable included all of the data during selective coding (Gallicano, 2013).

Ethical Considerations

This study has not asked the personal data of any participants because this uses a qualitative study procedure specifically using data collection approach employing autobiographies, further ensuring that this study has not embarrassed nor harmed anybody in the process.

Findings

Reasons for Studying FL

The participants were enrolled in Spanish and Mandarin. Based on the results, these foreign languages were the courses provided in their programs enrolled. Results show that students enroll in a Foreign Language for (1) course requirement and (2) internationalization.

Learning Modality Employed by FL Teacher

With COVID 19 affecting the education sector (Bao, 2020; Sintema, 2020; Toquero, 2020; Yan, 2020), it has opened opportunities for HEIs to use different learning modalities. Furthermore, FL teachers made use of the

online learning modality with audio and video-based instruction.

Activities or Lessons Used in FL Class

FL teachers employ both synchronous and asynchronous classes with live virtual activities and tasks that are accessible online and offline. These live virtual activities include practice drills, virtual oral exams, video viewing, live online classes, and recitations. Online tasks include online forms and quizzes, online classroom tasks, and online translations. Offline tasks, on the other hand, include offline research works, assignments, paper and pencil assessments, and tasks found in self-instructional materials.

Positive and Negative Aspects of Studying a Language in the Current Modality

Positively, this modality has provided the students with the leisure of convenience, independence, and a conducive virtual environment. This virtual environment includes a safe and conducive classroom atmosphere with the availability of the resources and teachers' consideration. Negatively, the students think that this modality has provided less class interaction with problems on connectivity issues.

Students' Success in FL Learning in the Current Modality

The students' success in FL learning is affected by many reasons such as lesson comprehension, teaching pedagogy, classroom activities, connectivity issues, familiarity with the foreign language currently enrolled, time restrictions, self-regulation decisions, class interaction, and student interests.

Contributory Factors Affecting the Students' Success/Lack of Success

It was then identified that there are two main contributory factors in their success or lack of success in FL learning. These factors are what students attribute their level of achievement in learning the foreign language: virtual classroom environment, and students' drive and motivation.

Students' Perceptions about Learning a Language as a Result of These Experiences

As observed, the students feel interested and challenged to learn the foreign language as an effect of their experiences. Along with their interest in FL learning are their inspiration, fulfillment, thankfulness, and excitement as they engage themselves in the learning tasks, all of which push them to feel challenged in acquiring more learnings and experiences.

Students' Perceptions about Learning a Language in the Traditional Set-Up

The participants also acknowledged that there would have been a different learning experience: (a) learning would be more convenient, such that students will have enough time to access and answer activities; (b) class environment would be more conducive, such that teachers and students can easily interact during discussions, and teachers can directly answer queries and provide feedback; and (c) instruction would be differentiated, such that there would be a variety of activities to cater students' individual differences.

Students' Perceptions on How to Make 'New Normal' FL Classes More Effective

Based on the students' perceptions regarding what they could have changed in FL classes in the "new normal" to make them more effective, they suggested to make the virtual class more conducive, employ

suitable learning modalities, and make FL courses as elective.

Table 1 below provided the responses' open codes. Through axial coding, a general selective code was then generated. As can be observed, three themes were derived from open coding: (a) virtual classroom environment; (b) teaching pedagogy; and (c) drive and motivation. All these round up to encapsulate *virtual classroom management* which refers to both the FL teachers' management (in the virtual classroom, instruction, and interaction) and the FL students' self-management (self-regulation decisions, time flexibility, drive, and motivation).

Table 1
Axial Codes and Selective Code Based on the Open Codes

Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective Coding
Connectivity Issues		
Convenience		
Conducive Virtual Classroom Environment		
Improved Virtual Classroom Environment	Virtual Classroom Environment	
Virtual Class Environment		
Less Class Interaction		
Improved Teaching Pedagogy		
Learning Modality		Virtual Classroom Management
Online Class		
Audio and Video-based Instruction		
Live Virtual Activities	Teaching Pedagogy	
Online Tasks		
Offline Tasks		
Course Requirement		
FL as Course Requirement		
Internationalization		
Independence	Drive and Motivation	
Drive and Motivation		
Interested to Learn FL		
Challenged to Learn FL		

Discussion of Findings

Reasons for Studying FL

In some degree programs in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), foreign language courses are part of the curriculum. Other degree programs, on the other hand, offer foreign language courses as electives or cognates; thus, students who choose to enroll in FL as their cognate enroll because they want to keep up with internationalization (IZN) – with prospected benefits in international understanding, interests, and travel. HEIs have been gearing towards internationalization as an agenda of growing strategic importance, driven by the influences of globalization (Robson, 2016; Wihlborg, 2017). Students are also driven by these influences which is why aside from FL being a course requirement, they opt to enroll in FL because of the aforementioned benefits.

Learning Modality Employed by FL Teacher

FL teachers made use of different platforms available online such as Google Classroom, Google Meet, Facebook, and Messenger. Supplementary videos (e.g., YouTube videos and teacher-made videos) are also provided to aid the students, further embracing the concept of 'self-study' (Phungsuk et al., 2017) where the students decide what and how they want to learn the concepts and materials provided to them. With all these, enough consideration should be given to the students' perceived positive and negative aspects of studying a language through this modality.

Activities or Lessons Used in FL Class

As a result of COVID 19's influence on education (Bao, 2020; Sintema, 2020; Toquero, 2020; Yan, 2020), HEIs have the opportunity to use audio and video-based teaching in their courses. Live virtual activities and tasks are available

both online and offline for synchronous and asynchronous classrooms. As a result, students may engage in live virtual activities like recitation or video watching in addition to traditional practice exercises and electronic oral examinations. Online forms and quizzes, online classroom activities, and online translations are all examples of online tasks. Offline tasks, on the other hand, consist of things like written research, assignments, and evaluations done using a pen and paper.

Contributory Factors Affecting the Students' Success/Lack of Success

In a study conducted by Park (2017), he has highlighted that there are two factors affecting successful online learning: time flexibility and authentic learning tasks. Time flexibility, being the most appealing option for the online learning modality (Romero & Barberà, 2011), has two constructs: instructional time and learner time. This factor allows the learners to identify their own duration, pace, and synchronicity with the activities. Authentic tasks, on the other hand, help learners develop authentic learning experiences through activities that emulate real life scenarios (Park, 2017; Roblyer & Edwards, 2000). With these factors in mind, FL teachers provide different activities suited for the current modality employed, ensuring more engagements from the students. Park (2017) further emphasized that upon designing an online course that involves authentic learning tasks, teachers should consider optimizing learners' behavioral interaction to maximize their learning effectiveness.

Moreover, FL teachers make use of different activities to ensure that the students learn to self-regulate – interpreting teacher expectations, setting appropriate goals, and adopting effective strategies to complete tasks (Beckman et al., 2019). Thus, with the online learning modality, students were not just taught the

subject components but were also taught how to effectively self-regulate.

Positive and Negative Aspects of Studying a Language in the Current Modality

Even with the presence of all the aforementioned benefits, enough consideration should be given to the students' perceived positive and negative aspects of studying a language through this modality. Positively, this modality has provided the students with the leisure of convenience, independence, and a conducive virtual environment. This virtual environment includes a safe and conducive classroom atmosphere with the availability of the resources and teachers' consideration (Phungsuk et al., 2017). Negatively, the students think that this modality has provided less class interaction with problems on connectivity issues.

Students' Perceptions about Learning a Language as a Result of These Experiences

The participants' responses were dispersed depending on their FL learning success. However, results show that most of these responses fall within the "average" bracket. Therefore, they perceived their FL learning to be moderately successful.

Furthermore, results provide that there are two main contributory factors in their success or lack of success in FL learning. These are what students attribute their level of achievement in learning the foreign language. These include (a) virtual classroom environment and (b) students' drive and motivation.

The virtual classroom environment is defined by Phungsuk et al. (2017) as anything that surrounds the students as they engage in virtual learning, including those experiences inside and outside their virtual class (Tibus et al., 2020). With virtual learning, students are given the opportunities to join their

classes wherever they are (Bower et al., 2016). Therefore, the virtual classroom environment also includes time flexibility and time constraints in answering the activities (Barmaki & Hughes, 2015; Miller, 2005; Smith, 1979), accessibility of the learning materials, feedbacking, teaching strategies, class interaction, and connectivity issues.

Moreover, the students' drive and motivation contribute a lot in their FL learning and this includes the students' patience, focus, and self-consciousness in learning the foreign language. The students' drive and motivation is defined as the combination of effort and the desire to achieve the goal of learning the language (Susanto, 2018). As cited by Liu (2015), Masgoret and Gardner (2003) highlight that in order to succeed, a learner must put out effort, stay focused on the work at hand for an extended period of time and make attributions regarding success and failure, enjoy the activity, and apply techniques to help in accomplishing their objectives. Therefore, if the student has enough drive and motivation to engage in the virtual classroom, then FL learning will be successful. If not, then the student will gain exactly the opposite.

As a result of their experiences, the students feel motivated and pushed to study a foreign language. Along with their interest in FL learning, they are inspired, fulfilled, appreciative, and excited when they engage in the learning exercises. These push them to feel challenged in gaining new knowledge and experiences.

However, the students somehow felt burdened and obligated during their whole FL learning experience. These feelings are all normal. In fact, in a study conducted by Tibus et al. (2020) entitled "Risk Factors of Students' Failure in a Blended Learning Instruction during the COVID-19 Pandemic", there are four factors that have been affecting the students as they learn through the modalities employed in these times. These

factors include virtual environment, degree of intrinsic motivation, virtual conduct, and perceived inability. All these factors support the students' responses pertaining their experiences while learning FL.

Students' Perceptions about Learning a Language in the Traditional Set-Up

The participants were then asked if they would have had a different learning experience if their FL class was conducted in a traditional set up. Long before the pandemic, Higher education institutions are increasingly moving away from the conventional on-campus, in-class education model in favor of an online learning delivery model (Alsaaty et al., 2016). With regards to the result of the study by Alsaaty et al. (2016), it was found out that students favor online courses over traditional face-to-face courses. Indeed, this study's findings are consistent with previous studies (Alsaaty, et al., 2016; Brown 2016; Neuhauser 2010; Pai, 2013;). However, the participants of this study have recognized that if they were enrolled in an FL face-to-face course, their learning experiences would have been different.

The participants acknowledged that there would have been a different learning experience: (a) learning would be more convenient, such that students would have enough time to access and answer activities; (b) the class environment would be more conducive, such that teachers and students could easily interact during discussions, and teachers could directly answer queries and provide feedback; and (c) instruction would be differentiated, such that there would be a variety of activities to cater students' individual differences. Regardless, the students were able to cope with reasonable levels of academic stress by using a wide range of coping techniques (Tibus & Ledesma, 2021).

In their research, Alsaaty et al. (2016) posited that most of the students

perceived online learning as positive despite experiencing multiple problems such as lack of instructional materials, poor organization, limited faculty access and poor technological infrastructure. This explains why students acknowledge positive aspects of the current learning modality while admitting a possible difference in their learning experiences if their FL classes were done traditionally.

Moreover, they highlighted that "education institutions around the world continues to debate as to whether online courses are perceived as being as less rigorous than face-to-face course." Regardless, both of these modalities offer different advantages and disadvantages. So to ensure higher learning rates from FL students, teachers must take into consideration the students' perceptions especially in designing FL instructions.

Students' Perceptions on How to Make 'New Normal' FL Classes More Effective

Based on the students' perceptions regarding what they could have changed in FL classes in the "new normal" to make them more effective, they suggested to ensure that their FL virtual classroom environment is made more conducive ((Phungsuk, Viriyavejakul, & Ratanaolarn, 2017), such that there is an improved quality of technological resources and connectivity, improved time management skills, differentiated instruction with more activities, drills, and one-on-one coaching, smaller class size, more teacher-student engagement, and accessible quality learning materials. They also acknowledged the importance of choosing the suitable learning modality in FL courses. However, given the situation with COVID-19, online classes would be more preferable. Thus, to cater to the students' yearning, HEIs and FL teachers should provide the students with breathers and be more collective to the students' learning needs. With this, based on the results, the students came up with thoughts on having FL courses as elective

rather than compulsory. This is to remove the tension that arises when students felt burdened and obliged.

Three themes were further derived: (a) virtual classroom environment; (b) teaching pedagogy; and (c) drive and motivation. All these round up to encapsulate *virtual classroom management*. This refers to both the FL teachers' management (in the virtual classroom, instruction, and interaction) and the FL students' self-management (self-regulation decisions, time flexibility, drive, and motivation).

Conclusion

Since the students' perceptions of their FL learning classroom experiences have important pedagogical and programmatic implications, this study aimed to identify whether this "new normal" education brought changes to the students' perceptions toward learning FL, further determining the pedagogical implications of the students' perceptions on the modalities applied by "new normal" FL classes in the Philippines.

The "new normal" FL education has provided the students with the leisure of convenience, independence, and a conducive virtual environment. However, they perceive that this modality has provided them with less class interaction while having problems on connectivity issues. With this, they perceive their FL learning to be moderately successful. The two main contributory factors in their success or lack of success in FL learning include the virtual classroom environment and the students' drive and motivation. Moreover, the respondents acknowledge that there would have been a different learning experience if FL classes were done differently, such that learning would be more convenient, the class environment would be more conducive, and instruction would be more differentiated. Therefore, the learning experiences of FL

students in the "new normal" all depend in the virtual classroom management which includes the virtual classroom environment as a whole, the teaching pedagogy, and the students' drive and motivation to learn FL. To ensure higher learning rates, there is a need to consider the FL teachers' management (in the virtual classroom, instruction, and interaction) and the FL students' self-management (self-regulation decisions, time flexibility, drive, and motivation).

Based on these findings, if FL virtual classes are properly managed, these may have a considerable potential for boosting educational productivity. Further, it provides access to a plethora of information, knowledge, and educational resources, expanding possibilities for learning both in and out of the classroom. Teachers utilize internet materials to prepare classes, while students use online materials to broaden their learning opportunities. Therefore, students become more engaged in FL discussions.

Furthermore, anchoring on Schumann's Cultural Introject Theory, it is suggested that having a cross-cultural communication class would be beneficial to foreign language study. At the same time, in foreign language teaching practice, it is also necessary to interlude culture input to assist the learners in grasping the foreign language thinking mode. With such knowledge on the implications of the findings, policymakers need to devise logical solutions to address gaps and to bridge traditional and new normal class set-ups.

With the findings of the current study, it was identified that the virtual classroom environment also rounds up the teaching pedagogy of the FL instructors. However, the study was not able to determine the different teaching pedagogies that could've been more useful to make FL learning more effective for the students in the

'new normal'. Future researchers could anchor on the findings of this study and provide recently developed methods and techniques for FL teaching.

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