

A Study on the Problems Faced by Myanmar Students in Learning French

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Abstract

This study is an analysis of the problems faced by Myanmar students in learning French as a foreign language and the factors affecting Myanmar students in learning French. The data were analysed using quantitative descriptive methods. The questionnaire was used in this study. The sample comprised of 100 students aged between 17 to 19 years including 18 males and 82 females. The population in this research was undergraduate students of third and final year French. Students' responses were analysed and tabulated. The result of this study indicated that students have problems in learning French based on the students' responses. The students have problem in internal factor and external factor. In internal factor, the students have problem in proficiency, such as the students have problem in reading skills and they do not understand French idioms and do not have adequate French vocabulary. The students find that it is hard for them to practise in French and to understand the voice of native speaker and they do not have a lot of interest in French. As an external factor, the problem is in the insufficient support from government and French embassy. The findings of the study indicated that lack of exposure, lack of opportunity to practice French outside the classroom and lack of insufficient support were the main external factors. This study will be beneficial for teachers' curriculum and strategies development for French language teaching.

Keywords: problems, skills, French as a foreign language, students

I. Introduction

French is at the moment a foreign language in Myanmar. Myanmar itself and neighbouring countries are not French speaking countries apart from Laos. The use of French is wide-spread in Myanmar even though it is not very popular language in the country. French is widespread as a language of business, technology, and diplomacy and the language of tourism. French language plays an important role in the different aspects of life especially in business and commerce. A French-speaking person or nation is called Francophone in both English and French. There is a widespread perception that French language is difficult to learn compared to other European languages, French is a national language in 28 countries around the world, Belchamber (2010). French represents the second most commonly taught foreign language across the world. French is one of the most widely used global languages. French is an official language of the United Nations, the African Union and is an official working language of many international organizations such as the International Red Cross and the International Olympic Committee. French language, like other world languages, represents knowledge, culture, philosophy and art. Harmer (2002) stated that there are many possible reasons for studying a language.

At University of Foreign Languages, the teaching and learning of foreign languages is a response to the need of the community in a developing country like Myanmar, to train and empower different categories of students to communicate and access information and knowledge in today's skills-oriented global economy.

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II. Aims and objectives

The intended purpose of this study is to effectively measure the problems faced by Myanmar students and the factors affecting Myanmar students in learning French. By focusing on students' problems and factors, the findings of this study have the potential to make a significant impact on the students and teachers regarding teaching and learning French.

III. Data and Method

3.1 Study Design

This study was institution based cross-sectional study which was conducted from August to October 2019 at Mandalay University of Foreign Languages in Mandalay. This study produced quantitative data through questionnaire. The study adopted the descriptive survey design. The total number of respondents were 100 students consisting of 18 males and 82 females from MUFL. They were 3rd and 4th year undergraduate students aged around 17-19 years. A survey questionnaire was distributed to those who volunteered to participate. Anonymity was maintained. Data were collected through self-filled questionnaire by participants. A total of 100 (100%) students responded to the questionnaire.

3.2 Questionnaire Design

The survey questionnaire was constructed and adapted from original questionnaire developed by Ratana (2007). The instrument used for the study was questionnaire of five-point Likert scale to measure the level of Agreements, (1= strongly disagree-*SD*, 2= disagree-*D*, 3= neutral-*N*, 4= agree- *A*, 5= strongly agree- *SA*). The survey was in English only. The questionnaire consisted of two parts in the form of close ended questions and five point Likert-scale. The different sections of the questionnaire were personal information (including gender and age), demographic background and problems faced by Myanmar students in the skills which are listening, speaking, reading, writing and teaching-learning environment and motivation.

3.3 Statistical Analysis

Level of Agreement less than 2.5 assumed as 'area of concern', from 2.5 to 3.49 as 'area of improvement', from 3.5 and above as 'positive area'. Data analysis consisted of frequency distribution for each variable when applicable. Mean scores and standard deviation were analysed and reported to reflect the problems on each aspect.

IV. Scope of the Study

This study has focused on (100) students who are learning French from semester (2) of (201802019) academic year in MUFL. The study assessed that Myanmar student's problems covering the factors affecting Myanmar students in learning French, problems in listening skills, speaking skills, reading skills and writing skills which might how these problems could be met and resolved.

V. Research Questions

This study was aimed to investigate on the following questions:

- What are Myanmar student's problems in learning French?
- What are the factors affecting Myanmar students in learning French?

VI. Literature Review

Learning a foreign language gives a perfect opportunity to open up and learn about other cultures. A high-quality languages education promotes students' curiosity and extends their understanding of the world. Richards, et al. (1992) expressed foreign language as a language which is not a native language in a country.

According to Lightbrown & Spada (1999), language learners are expected to be able to efficiently express themselves in the target language and successfully communicate in real-life situations. Anderson and Lynch (1988) stated that lack of socio-cultural, factual, and contextual knowledge of the target language can be seen as an obstacle to comprehension because language is used to express its culture.

Motivation has been stated as a key factor for success in language acquisition (Clément, 1980; Dörnyei, 1998; Tremblay & Gardner, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Language is a very important means of communication. There is not a society without language. It creates people's thoughts and leads and controls their entire activity.

Verghese (2009) affirmed that attitude, self-confidence, motivation, duration of exposure to the language, classroom conditions, environment, family background, and availability of competent teachers are the factors affecting the process of learning a second language. Othman (1991) asserted that during learning process, every learner faces a difficulty, a problem or a pause, as well as the acquisition of new information, acquiring new skill, and solving a problem. Therefore, the success in overcoming the learning difficulties helps in achieving the goals of the learning process.

VII. Finding and Discussion

7.1 Finding

The aim of this study is to explore the problem faced by Myanmar students in learning French. As well as to identify the factors affecting Myanmar students in learning French. A total of 100 students consist of 18 males and 82 females from MUFL responded to the questionnaire. They were 3rd and 4th year undergraduate students aged around 17-19 years.

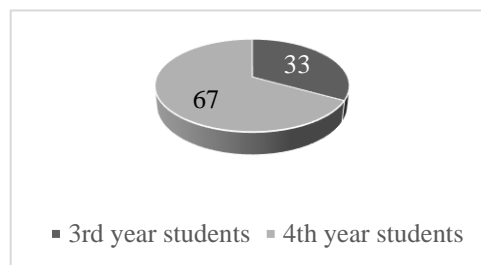


Figure.1. Distribution of the students in each academic year.

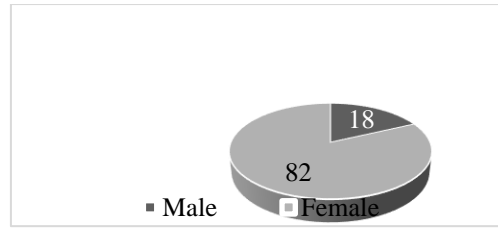


Figure 2. Students' gender

Table.1. Demographic background of Myanmar students in learning French

DEMOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND			
No.	Questions	Yes (%)	No (%)
1	Do you think that it is important to speak with good pronunciation?	100	-
2	Do you think it is important for you to practices correct French in your classes?	94	6
3	Do you think that learning French will be interesting or important in your daily life?	48	52
4	Do you think it is important to increase people awareness to practice correct French?	71	29
5	Is it hard for you to practise French?	76	24
6	Do you have interests to study French?	66	34
7	Do you think it is possible to be a good speaker in French?	62	38
8	Is it important for you to make your French pronunciation sounds correctly?	97	3
9	Do you think it is important to communicate in French with your friends in a classroom?	75	25
10	Do you refer to dictionary if you have problem to find certain words in French?	96	4

Table (1) summarizes the demographic background of Myanmar students in learning French. A total number of 100 students agreed that it is important to speak with good pronunciation. For questions number 2, 94 % of students expressed that it is important for them to practices correct French in their classes. However, only 52% of students agreed that learning French will be interesting or important in their daily life. Seventy-one percent of the student supposed that it is important to increase people awareness to practice correct French. Majority of the students stated that it is hard for them to practise French. For question number 6 and 7, only a few students agreed that they have interests to study French and it is possible to be a good speaker in French. A great number of the students (97%) considered that it is important for them to make their French pronunciation sound correctly. Seventy-five percent of the students stated that it is important to communicate in French with their friends in a class. For question number 10, (96%) of the students agreed that they refer to dictionary if they have problem to find certain words in French.

Table. 2. Frequency, mean and standard deviation of Problems in Listening Skills

No.	Statements	Level of Agreement					Mean Level of Agreement (Rating on 5 Points)
		1 SD	2 D	3 N	4 A	5 SA	
11	I understand the tone of voice of a native speaker.	13	30	38	7	2	2.25
12	I can understand a native speaker speaking at normal speed.	9	21	48	16	6	2.89
13	I can understand an attitude, customs, and social circumstances of a speaker.	8	35	43	11	3	2.66
14	I can understand classroom lectures in French.	3	14	48	25	10	3.25
15	I can understand comments given by speakers.	7	28	42	18	5	3.42
16	I participate class discussions in French.	5	28	26	30	11	3.14
17	I participate group discussions in French.	2	19	33	30	16	3.39
18	I feel comfortable in listening in the classroom.	21	35	30	12	2	2.39
19	I can understand the main idea of the native speaker.	13	34	37	12	4	2.60
20	I never have a listening problem.	25	49	21	5	-	2.06
Problems in Listening Skills							2.80
Standard Deviation							0.46

Table (2) illustrates the difficulties faced by students in listening skills. The result in the first statement showed that nearly half of the students (43%) cannot understand the tone of voice of the native speaker. For the statement 12, a few students (22%) can understand a native speaker speaking at normal speed. Regarding to the statement 13, only (14%) can understand an attitude, customs, and social circumstances of a speaker. Thirty-five percent of students can understand classroom lectures in French. Although (35%) of students cannot understand comments given by speakers, (41%) of the students stated that they are participating group discussions in French. Majority of the students expressed that they feel uncomfortable in listening in the classroom. Sixteen percent of the student stated that they can understand the main idea of the native speaker. Most of the students (74%) declared that they have a listening problem. This finding suggests that it needs to improve teaching in listening skills. The mean average of difficulties in listening was 2.80 ± 0.46 .

Speaking Skills

No.	Statements	Level of Agreement					Mean Level of Agreement (Rating on 5 Points)
		1 SD	2 D	3 N	4 A	5 SA	
21	I can have an informal conversation in French.	2	31	46	17	4	2.9
22	I can have a formal conversation in French.	5	32	44	17	2	2.67
23	I can perform academic Presentation in French in the classroom.	4	28	46	18	4	2.9
24	I have an adequate French Vocabulary for speaking.	5	49	39	5	2	2.5
25	I can explain my idea clearly in French.	13	41	29	15	2	2.52
26	My friends understand my pronunciation.	2	19	38	27	14	3.32
27	I find it easy to express myself in French.	3	19	40	28	10	3.23
28	I can ask questions in French in the classroom.	6	35	30	20	9	2.15
29	I feel comfortable in talking with an instructor in the classroom.	11	32	36	14	7	2.74
30	I never have a speaking problem.	20	36	36	6	2	2.34
Problems in Speaking Skills							2.72
Standard Deviation							0.35

Table.3. Frequency, mean and standard deviation of Problems in

Table (3) summarizes the difficulties faced by students in speaking skills. Some of the students expressed that they can have an informal and formal conversation in French and they can perform academic presentation in French in the classroom. For the statements 24 and 25, (54%) of the students stated that they do not have an adequate French vocabulary for effective speaking and they cannot explain their idea clearly in French. Students (41%) considered that their friends understand their pronunciation and (38%) found it easy to express themselves in French. Only (29%) admitted that they can ask questions in French in the classroom. In addition, (41%) of students stated that they feel uncomfortable in talking with an instructor in the class. Fifty-six percent of the students expressed that they have a speaking problem. According to the students' responses with the mean average of 2.72 ± 0.35 , students' have difficulties in speaking skills and teachers should be aware of the strategies in teaching speaking skills.

Table.4. Frequency, mean and standard deviation of Problems in Reading Skills

No.	Statements	Level of Agreement					Mean Level of Agreement (Rating on 5 Points)
		<i>1 SD</i>	<i>2 D</i>	<i>3 N</i>	<i>4 A</i>	<i>5 SA</i>	
31	I can read an academic textbook in French.	5	18	44	2	7	2.16
32	I can read a magazine in French.	10	38	43	9	-	2.51
33	I can guess the meaning of new vocabulary.	9	34	34	20	3	2.74
34	I can understand French idioms.	22	53	21	4	-	2.07
35	I can explain the main idea and summary the passage.	7	30	44	15	4	2.79
36	I never have a reading problem.	6	31	47	14	2	2.75
<i>Problems in Reading Skills</i>							2.50
<i>Standard Deviation</i>							0.32

Table (4) exposes the difficulties faced by students in reading skills. Only (9%) of the students stated that they can read an academic textbook in French. For the statement 32, (48%) of students considered that they cannot read a magazine in French. Twenty-third percent of the students admitted that they can guess the meaning of new vocabulary. Most of the students (75%) expressed that they cannot understand French idioms. Thirty-seven percent of the students affirmed that they cannot explain the main idea and cannot summary the passage and they have a reading problem. It is evident that students' have difficulties in reading skills with the mean average of 2.50 ± 0.32 and teachers should take immediate action to review the effective reading strategies.

No.	Statements	Level of Agreement					Mean Level of Agreement (Rating on 5 Points)
		1 SD	2 D	3 N	4 A	5 SA	
37	I can write an academic paper in French.	11	24	45	17	15	3.37
38	I can write reports, projects, letters, and class assignments in French.	5	22	42	23	7	3.02
39	I can paraphrase French passages.	22	29	33	13	3	2.46
40	I can write an essay within limited time.	9	33	29	24	5	2.78
41	I can use perfectly grammatical rules in writing any papers.	12	29	39	18	1	2.64
42	I can choose appropriate vocabulary to write my paper.	5	26	49	17	3	2.87
43	I have an adequate French vocabulary for writing essay.	4	32	48	14	2	2.78
44	I am able to develop a suitable structure for the contents.	2	23	49	23	3	3.02
Problems in Writing Skills							2.86
Standard Deviation							0.28

Table 5. mean and standard deviation of Problems in Writing Skills

Table (5) describes the difficulties faced by students in writing skills. For the statements 37 and 38, some of the students expressed that they can write an academic paper and can write reports, projects, letters, and class assignments in French. Fifty-one percent of the students stated that they cannot paraphrase French passages. For the statement 40, a few of the students (24%) stated that they can write an essay within limited time. Only (19%) of the students agreed that they can use perfectly grammatical rules in writing any papers. One-third of students stated that they cannot choose appropriate vocabulary to write their paper. For the statement 43, only (16%) of the students stated that they have an adequate French vocabulary for writing essay. Twenty-five percent of the students expressed that they are not able to develop a suitable structure for the contents. Students' response in table 5 concluded that students' have difficulties in writing skills with the mean average of 2.86 ± 0.28 and this finding suggests that it needs to improve teaching writing skills.

Table.6. Frequency, mean and standard deviation of Problems in Teaching-Learning environment and motivation

No.	Statements	Level of Agreement					Mean Level of Agreement (Rating on 5 Points)
		1 SD	2 D	3 N	4 A	5 SA	
45	The institution have safe and sufficient physical facilities.	6	32	43	14	5	2.8
46	The institution have sufficient teaching staffs and expertise.	7	23	32	25	13	3.14
47	There is an encouragement of parents.	7	14	26	28	25	3.5
48	There is a support of Government.	55	35	8	1	1	1.58
49	There is a support of French Embassy.	64	32	1	2	1	1.44
Problems in Teaching-Learning environment and motivation							2.49
Standard Deviation							0.93

Table (6) summarizes the difficulties faced by students in Teaching-Learning environment and motivation. Thirty-eight percent of the students responded that the institution have not safe and sufficient physical facilities. For the statement 46, (38%) expressed that the institution have sufficient teaching staffs and expertise. Only (21%) of the students stated that they don't have an encouragement of their parents. A great number of students stated that there is not a support from government and French embassy. According to the students' response, there are difficulties in teaching-learning environment and motivation with the mean average of 2.49 ± 0.93 which need to take an immediate consideration to create a better teaching-learning environment and to get a support from both government and French embassy.

Table.7. Means and Ranks for Problems in Learning French, Sorted in Descending Order

Difficulties in Learning French	Mean Level of Agreement (Rating on 5 Points)
Problems in Writing Skills	2.86 - Area of improvement
Problems in Listening Skills	2.8 - Area of improvement
Problems in Speaking Skills	2.72 - Area of improvement
Problems in Reading Skills	2.5 - Area of improvement
Problems in Teaching-Learning environment and motivation	2.49 - Area of concern
<i>Overall Rating on Problems Faced by Students in Learning French</i>	2.67 - Area of improvement
<i>Standard Deviation</i>	0.17

According to table (7), the most serious learning French difficulties reported by Myanmar students was teaching-learning environment and motivation. Other difficulties revealed in this study were reading skills, speaking skills, listening skills and the least difficulty skills is writing skills. Students' reported that they do not get support from government and French embassy. Another difficulty faced by Myanmar students was reading skills and major tasks of reading skills difficulties are the ability to read an academic textbook in French and the ability to understand French idioms. For speaking skills, students have the difficulties in asking questions in French in the class because Myanmar students have intonation problems as Myanmar language does not use intonation to differentiate questions and statements. Some of the Difficulties faced by students in listening skills are lack of understanding the voice of native speaker and lack of comfort in listening in the classroom. After that, another factors affecting Myanmar students faced difficulties in learning French are that it is hard for them to practice in French and they do not think that learning French is interesting and important in their daily life. Students do not have the opportunity to use French in their daily life and they have lack of exposure about French language. As a result, students do not have motivation to use French.

7.2 Discussion

According to the students' responses on this study, Myanmar students encounter the lack of support from government and French embassy in learning French. Due to the lack of political will on the part of the government hindered the effective teaching of French in MUFL. The government needs to engage more French native teachers for the effective implementation of French teaching and learning in MUFL.

Lack of the necessary infrastructures such as language laboratory, internet facilities and materials are not been well provided for MUFL. Therefore, the absence of these materials

caused a problem to students in learning French. They expressed that they want a better library providing resources such as French textbooks, exercises books, electronic books, journals, study space and environment. Most of the students are not satisfied with the desk bench in the classroom because it is not appropriate for doing activities and it makes class space narrow and inconvenient. As a support from French embassy, students showed their interest in having the scholarships programs or students exchange programs with Francophone countries to encourage them to study the language and supports for French learning textbooks, audios and video CDs. Students stated that they also prefer to learn with a native speaker and they believed that it would bring more effective outcomes in learning French. The support in the form of scholarship will stimulate the interest of the students and motivation. A student who lacks interest or motivation cannot learn effectively.

The findings of this study also demonstrated that students faced difficulties in following skills; reading, speaking, listening and writing skills. In reading skills, teachers need to remedy the situation by reviewing or innovating teaching and learning strategies of reading and idioms and students also need to practice a lot. French language is not a very familiar subject in Myanmar and that is why it is very hard for the students to understand or express ideas effectively.

Besides, students have problems in asking questions in French because they have intonation problems to differentiate questions and statements and they lack an adequate French vocabulary to find context specific words for speaking. Students stated that they have a problem in speaking skills. Students prefer to speak in their native language outside the classroom so they do not have a lot of practice in French with their friends. Lack of exposure and opportunities to practise French language outside classroom is one of the factors students faced in learning French. To enhance the speaking competence of the students in the oral communication class, language learning strategies should link to effective communicative activities in the classroom. The teachers have to create a warm classroom atmosphere, but also to give each student a chance to speak or play a role. According to Vogt and Short (2006), learning is more effective when students have an opportunity to participate fully, actively discussing ideas and information rather than teachers talking and students listening.

In addition, the native-French speakers' speaking is one of the factors affecting the students' listening skills. Students' confirmed that they feel uncomfortable while listening in the class and they have a listening problem. Most of the students do not find opportunity to hear French from the mouth of a native speaker. Teachers should provide the student's models of good pronunciation, make an effort to expose as many different accents as they can and do a lot of practice by speaking to students in French and encourage them.

One of the areas of students' weakness in writing is paraphrasing French passages. In order to improve writing skill, teachers should provide a lot of practice such as class-work and home work on writing because the more the students write, the better their writing will get. And then, teachers have to make them understand the importance of everyday reading and the link between reading and writing.

According to the data obtained by this study, it can be concluded that students found problems in teaching-learning environment and motivation in learning French. The least problematic skills is writing skills. The students have problems in internal factor and external factor. In internal factor, the students have problems in proficiency, such as the students have problem in reading skills and they do not understand French idioms and do not have adequate French vocabulary. The students find that it is hard for them to practice in French and to understand the voice of native speaker and they do not have a lot of interest in French. As an external factor, the problem is in the insufficient support from government and French

embassy. The findings of the study indicated that lack of exposure, lack of opportunity to practice French outside the classroom and lack of insufficient support were the most important external factors.

VIII. Conclusion and Further Studies

The findings of this study are based on a sample of 100 students, 18 males and 82 females from MUFL. The study was aimed to investigate the problems faced by Myanmar students in learning French in MUFL. After analysing the students' responses, large percentage showed that it is hard for them to practise French. It was also noticed that students expressed that Learning French is not interesting or important in their daily life. In terms of skills, receptive skills; reading and productive skills; speaking were considered to be the more difficult than listening and writing.

Learning French comes with some problems which can be overcome if appropriate measures are taken to confront these challenges. The students need a patient and dedicated teacher who will help them overcome all their language defects. A teacher plays a very big role in teaching-learning language. In this regard, Harmer (2002) pointed out that one of the main tasks for teachers is to provoke interest and involvement in the subject even when students are not initially interested in it. Regarding the effective teaching and learning of the language, French teachers would be necessary re-training through seminars and workshops for methodologies and teaching strategies.

Both the teachers and the students of French language should be motivated through scholarships to francophone countries. Equally, modern laboratories and libraries should be sited in MUFL to facilitate the learning of the language. Additionally, the government should subsidize the amount needed for the linguistic immersion programme in MUFL.

This study has only conducted in MUFL. We should also try to make a study on similar topic in Yangon University of Foreign Languages. The further study will ascertain that the problems occurring in learning French in MUFL is also happening in YUFL and French teachers from both universities will consider to remedy the problems. Teaching-learning problems in learning French and remedies could be explored in future investigation. In order to progress the students in learning language, it totally depends on the teachers' competence and the curriculum they taught and strategies and methods of teaching French they used.

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