

Exploring Bangladeshi learners' lived experiences of studying French in a foreign language context: A phenomenological study

Mizanur Rahman

Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore learners' experiences of studying in the newly introduced Bachelor in French Language and Culture (BFLC) programme at the Institute of Modern Languages, University of Dhaka to determine both positive aspects and shortcomings of the programme. The identification of the existing challenges will play a significant role in overcoming them and thus ensuring the quality of teaching/learning of the BFLC programme. A semi-structured interview guide was used to collect data from a purposeful sample of 7 participants. The findings were analysed following a qualitative data analysis method to identify the emergent themes. The findings demonstrate that the merits of the course are agreeable class size, the prospect of employment opportunities at the end of successful completion of the programme, engaging in co-curricular activities, and easy access to friendly and cooperative teachers. On the other hand, major challenges of the programme identified through the analysis of the qualitative data are lack of properly developed syllabus and curriculum, lack of proper use of educational technology, teacher's irregularity in teaching a class, use of poor methods and approaches of teaching.

Keywords: *French as a foreign language, lived experiences, foreign language at tertiary level*

Introduction

The present world of globalisation has witnessed increased demand for communication among people speaking diverse languages in multicultural settings, especially in the “domains of business, tourism, hotel management, catering, hospitality industry and international relations” (Wagaba, 2010, p.96). Hence, the demand for people to have good communicative competence in a foreign language is on the rise. The phenomenon has led to the ever-increasing growth of foreign language pedagogy across the globe. To keep pace with the rest of the world, the education policymakers in Bangladesh have always highlighted the need for having a community of people having high communicative competence in the dominating modern languages such as French, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese and Korean etc.

In the past, the role of foreign language teaching in the Bangladeshi context was dominated by historical and political reasons. Studying foreign languages such as Arabic, Persian, Urdu and English was driven by the conquest and domination of the country by foreign occupants. However, after the independence of Bangladesh, the need for studying foreign languages has undergone a major change. Currently, the driving force for foreign language teaching/learning activities in Bangladesh is the endeavour to create highly competent foreign-language speakers who will be able to work efficiently in a multilingual context and will thus lessen the economic cost of not having efficient means for communication among people speaking diverse languages in the field of education, trade, commerce, bi-lateral relationship etc.

French is one of the most popular foreign languages taught in different academic institutions in Bangladesh. Several English

medium schools and universities (both public and private) have been offering French language courses such as foundation courses and non-degree courses. The duration of most of these short courses is just one term/one semester. Several universities including the University of Dhaka have been offering either short foundation courses in French or long non-degree programmes (3-4 years) in the French language. These courses at the University of Dhaka are open to both the current students at the university and the public with the academic requirement of having a minimum Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC).

In 2015, the Institute of Modern Languages, University of Dhaka, introduced a four-year-long B.A. in French Language and Culture (BFLC) programme for the first time in Bangladesh. The first batch of students of this programme has completed the undergraduate programme in 2020. Since the above-mentioned BFLC programme is still in its developmental stage, it is important to identify the shortcomings of the programme so that efficacious steps can be adopted to enhance the quality of this programme by eradicating the existing challenges. The best way to identify the frailty of the programme will be to get the perspective of those who experienced it from the service recipient's perspective. In this context, the researcher has attempted this study to get the perspective of the learners who have completed their 4 year-long undergraduate programmes in French Language and Culture (BFLC) in 2020.

Traditionally, learners' role in the decision-making in the teaching/learning activities has been mostly ignored. Their voices have largely remained unheard. Teachers have usually been portrayed as sole experts who are considered to be capable of making informed decisions about effective classroom practice (Richards & Nunan, 1990). In many contexts, policymakers and

teachers find it difficult to accept their learners as people with a positive contribution to make to the instructional process. However, the fact is that both teachers and learners bring with them their perceptions of what constitutes language teaching and learning (Kumaravadivelu, 1991), and "all learners already critically evaluate the tasks they undertake" (Breen, 1989, p.205). Hence, it is very imperative to look for the perception of the learners to see the other side of the coin. Allwright (1984) and Rudduck (1991) refer to ignoring learners' views as "our blind spot" (p. 30).

Learners interpret tasks and other classroom events from their perspectives, which often differ from the perceptions of teachers (Kumaravadivelu, 1991). According to Box (1980) cited in Barkhuizen (1998), "The learners have a thorough understanding of what goes on in a class and teachers should, therefore, align their task orientation to that of the learners."

In line with this, it is very likely that the students who have completed B.A. in French Language and Culture recently will be able to provide a significant amount of information about the pros and cons of the overall programme. Thus, the findings will help the concerned authority understand the dimension of the existing challenges from the learners' perspective and adopt efficacious remedial measures for future clientele. To achieve this goal, the researcher has conducted a "descriptive phenomenology" (Arther et al, 2006).

Phenomenological research is an "in-depth study of a specific phenomenon, group or individuals or of perceptions of social phenomena" (Notter & Burnard, 2006,p. 151). According to most researchers, phenomenology is about experience. However, there is a lack of clarification on the term experience. McilPatrick et al.

(2006) defined it as “an experience as understood by those having it. In this type of research, researchers endeavour to explore “the phenomenon of being understood” (Shattell, McAllister, Hogan, & Thomas, 2006, p. 235). Other authors had searched for a description of experience, e.g., “to access the depth of personal experiences, as well as internally interpreted meanings of those experiences” (Bent & Magilvy, 2006, p. 449). To sum up, the main goal of phenomenological research is to understand the subjective world of human experience and hear the silenced voices about particular issues (Creswell, 2007), so that it can help one understand the social phenomena as perceived by human participants who are involved in it.

Research Question

This study aimed at exploring the answers to the following three questions:

1. To what extent have the teaching and learning practices in the FLC programme been able to meet the needs of the learners?
2. Which factors have contributed to a positive learning experience in the department? How?
3. Which factors have negatively affected the quality of the programme? How?

Literature Review

There is a good number of literatures on SLA and foreign language pedagogy but most of this research is predominated by Anglo-centric research. Even though the context of teaching English and that of teaching other foreign languages such as French or Spanish is quite different, there are some common

factors which affect the foreign language pedagogy irrespective of the context.

Wagba's (2010) study at Mackerel University identified several challenges in foreign language programmes such as learners' attitude toward learning the particular language, admission criteria, approach to foreign language teaching, inappropriate teaching materials and inappropriate approaches for specific language components, minimal focus on the teaching of listening skill, the teaching of the grammar and use of translation as the primary technique, absence of institutionalised tools and mechanism in place to evaluate and assess the teaching styles and learning styles as well as the performance of foreign language learners. In addition, there was no provision for needs analysis.

An analysis of the existing literature on foreign language teaching and learning has also revealed similar factors which determine the quality of a foreign language programme. These factors have been briefly discussed in the following paragraphs:

The need analysis of the foreign language learners is the first and foremost task for ensuring quality education for the language learners. It is imperative to discard a one-size-fits-all approach (Seedhouse, 1995) and address learners' needs to make any language programme successful. Importance should be given to understanding the discourse practices where the language is situated and where the learners will operate (Orr, 2002). When a teaching and learning design does not consider the needs of a particular group of learners, the programme is likely to be inadequate and ineffective. Norris (2016) says that need analysis may assume a primarily developmental role by providing a basis for understanding who the clients and other stakeholders of the programme are, what their (and others') expectations from the

programme may be, and what kinds of programme activities may best foster desired outcomes. According to Richards (2001), need analysis is a process of curriculum development.

The second most important factor is the availability of a well-developed curriculum, which is “a very general concept involving consideration of the whole complex of philosophical, social and administrative factors that contribute to the planning of an education programme” (Allen, 1984, p. 62). A well-designed curriculum clearly states students’ as well as instructors’ roles and responsibilities, class procedures, grading, and attendance policies. It also creates an expectation from the learners (Matejke & Kurkey, 1994). The sequencing and selection of contents in the syllabus help the learners understand the teacher’s overall plan of course delivery and the way they should engage in the class activities. Syllabus helps learners “to organize, integrate, and direct learning.....[and] teachers [to] benefit from creating a syllabus built on scholar because it aids them in planning classroom activities based on curricular, subject matter, and pedagogical knowledge” (Albers, 2003, p. 60). Matejke and Kurkey (1994, as cited in Albers, 2003), mentions that a syllabus can be used as a teaching tool in four ways: a) contract, b) communicative tool, c) plan, and d) cognitive map.

The selection of effective authentic materials is another prerequisite for a successful language programme. Unfortunately, there is a common tendency to use materials which are available in the market ignoring their efficacy to meet the needs of the target students. The problem with these pre-prepared books is that they may not meet the needs of the learners with unique characteristics (O’Neill, 1982). Effective materials should have the capability to arouse a learner’s interest by relating to his background knowledge and experience (Nunan, 1988).

Again, there are many instances where people with insufficient theoretical and pedagogical knowledge for developing proper instructional materials to use in a foreign language class try to use materials that are available to them or provided by the department. Considering that materials writers need to be adept at understanding relevant theories and research findings concerning language learning and teaching, task design, and the principles of traditional language teaching, Wu (2001) stresses the importance of knowledge in these areas.

There is a close relation between approaches and methods of teaching and the use of instructional materials. For example, some materials can be good for the audio-lingual method but not for the communicative approach. According to Chien et al. (2020), most textbooks offer very limited opportunities for learners to engage in an authentic, meaningful learning context. Consequently, high reliance on the prescribed textbooks only will deprive the students of the practical contexts in the learning process (Yang et al. 2020).

The communicative ability not only encompasses inherent grammatical competence but also requires employing norms of usage and appropriateness in a variety of communicative situations (Hymes, 1972 cited in Yang et al., 2020). The recent development in science and technology has made it possible to simulate a variety of communicative situations. Online platforms, such as social networking sites, Wikis, and blogs have strengthened this new focus (Yang et al., 2020).

Learners' centredness is a very important factor in foreign language pedagogy. In a learner-centred approach, the students are put in the centre of all aspects of language learning such as planning, teaching, and evaluation (Richards and Schmidt (2010). In a learner-centred classroom, teachers need to pay more focus

on the needs of the learners, forsake traditional lecture notes and PowerPoint presentations and adopt a more active, engaging, collaborative style of teaching.

Learner-centred approach, rooted in the constructive philosophy of teaching, is also very conducive to more autonomous and self-directed learners (Brown, 2008). In a comparative study between learner-centred teaching and teacher-centred, Mutlaq Al-Zu'be (2013) identified that these methods have their unique strengths but shortcomings, but the learner-centred approach appeared to be more suitable for foreign language learning. Lak et al.'s (2017) study demonstrated significant positive results in improving reading skills in a learner-centred approach. Geisli (2009), and Gravoso and Pasa (2008) also found a positive result in a learner-centred approach.

It has been found that language teachers, in many cases, are not well prepared due to the lack of sufficient pedagogical and relevant theories. Crookes (1997) recognised that there are limitations in teacher preparation programmes for foreign language teachers. He noted that in his state of residence, FL teachers enter classrooms with no more than a couple of courses in pedagogy and no knowledge of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory and research.

The judicious use of technology for facilitating the teaching/learning of a foreign language makes a foreign language programme successful. Gibson (2002), Lam (2000), and Rodriguez-van Olphen (2002) pointed out the shortcomings of foreign language teacher education and the general topic of how these teachers learn or proceed to integrate technology into their emerging teaching practices (Cited in Olphen, 2007). Lindenau (1984) asserted that faculty involved in foreign language

education needed to develop a greater understanding of what technology could bring to the field of foreign language education. She cited insufficient teacher training and an acceptance of the status quo as the major challenges that the field would need to overcome to develop a technology-based approach. Lan (2019) added that “the skills of successfully using language and technology for interaction are important and may influence the acquisition of the other skills”. Shelley (1998, as cited in Olphen, 2007) reiterated that issues such as training, user-friendly systems, hands-on experience, and school support are major factors influencing foreign language teachers’ use of email and, by extension, other technologies. In his article, Zhang (2006) points out that with the help of multimedia and network technology, we are able to offer students not only rich sources of authentic learning materials, but also creative and friendly interfaces, vivid pictures and pleasant sound effects that overcome a lot of barriers and pique students' interest in learning English.

There exists a good relationship between classroom climate and student learning. Cultivating a positive environment that promotes student learning is an important objective for language educators at all levels of instruction (Gascoigne, 2012). Foreign language anxiety, which is a subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the automatic nervous system, prevails in a classroom where there is no positive environment (McIntyre & Gardner, 1994). It has been found that the feelings of tension or nervousness centre on the two basic task requirements of foreign language learning: listening and speaking (Horwitz et al., 1986). Foreign language teachers should recognise that the language classroom could become a highly anxiety-provoking environment for students (Tsui, 1996, as cited in Ohata, 2005). According to participants of the study the more

friendly and informal the language classroom environment, the less it is likely to be anxiety-provoking. Jones (2004) argued that making mistakes in front of classmates, and feeling awkward, foolish and incompetent in the eyes of classmates made the learners feel afraid. Students' embarrassment may be worsened by the language teacher's role in the class (Horwitz et al., 1986).

The role of student-teacher, teacher-student and student-student interaction in learning a foreign language beggars description. Even though many people consider that pair and group works are the best way to ensure student-student interaction, it is not always the case. Creating opportunities where language learners can exchange authentic personal information (e.g., interests, likes, dislikes, etc.) while practising the language is one way to ensure that students learn about one another and facilitate student-to-student connections (Gascoigne, 2012).

The accountability of a foreign language programme is also very important. The instructors need to be accountable for their teaching activities. The department should ensure proper monitoring and supervision of the teaching and learning practices. The programme authority needs to be accountable for any lapse in the programme. According to Mislevy (2007), it is important to develop a guided framework to ensure the accountability of the programme in a valid and defensible way.

To summarise, the literature review has provided a lot of comprehensive information about foreign language pedagogy and the good practices imperative for successful foreign language teaching/learning practices. Since there is a lack of literature on French language teaching and learning practices in Bangladesh, this study will fill up this gap in the literature.

Methodology

Design

A descriptive phenomenological study design was conducted to understand the lived experiences of the participants' pursuits of studying the French Language and Culture in a foreign language context in Bangladesh.

Participant Selection and Recruitment

The researcher deliberately recruited purposeful samples (Fletcher & Cox, 2012) of 7 students who had already completed an undergraduate programme in French during the period of data collection to get their emic view of the phenomenon of interest i.e., the learners' experience and opinion of the teaching/learning practices of BFLC programme. The main criterion for selecting participants is that they have a lived experience of the phenomenon (Woodgate, 2006). According to Moustakas (1994), a research participant is he or she who has experienced the intended phenomenon, is intensely interested in understanding the natures and meanings of the phenomenon and is willing to be involved in a lengthy interview. It is also necessary, according to Creswell (2007), that a researcher needs to find one or more individuals who can articulate their lived experiences. Accordingly, the researcher selected the 7 informants purposefully because they have completed the aforesaid undergraduate course; are capable of articulating their experiences; and agreed to participate in the interview voluntarily with the condition that they can be quoted anonymously or in a pseudonymised way.

The total number of the interviewees might seem a small size. However, the literature review suggests that there is no consensus

about the exact ideal sample size for a phenomenological study. Some researchers such as Sunvisson (2006) have conducted a phenomenological study with 1 participant only, whereas Newton (2007) conducted phenomenological research with 76 participants. According to Ellis (2016), a sample of between 6 and 20 informants is adequate for a phenomenological study. In that consideration, 7 participants are not an unusually small size.

Data Collection and Processing

To gather as much data as possible, a semi-structured interview guide/protocol was used. Though some researchers such as Wilson (2007) argued that focus group discussion/interview provides greater opportunities to generate deeper insight and validate the data in a phenomenological study, others such as Rydeman & Törnkvist (2006) argued that “focus-group interviews are not always thought to be compatible with a phenomenological approach” (p.1306). To avoid this controversy, the researcher deliberately avoided focus group discussion and relied on an in-depth semi-structured interview.

The interviews were conducted using zoom meeting (BDRen Zoom Premium) between January and February 2021. The interviews were recorded and stored in a secured place for transcription and analysis later.

The interview was conducted in the participant's first language, Bengali (L1) to ascertain that they could provide clear and profound responses to all interview questions. Most of the questions were based on the semi-structured interview guide while the follow-up questions were “in-situ...[while] interviewing the participants” (Mambu, 2016, p. 166).

The interview questions were framed as open as possible to provide maximum opportunity to the interviewees so that they can provide an answer in any direction. The interviewees were asked in-depth follow-up questions to increase their understanding of the topic being discussed. All the interviews ended with a verbal summary of findings to allow the interviewees to give comments, make a correction or add additional thoughts. The following questions followed by numerous follow-up questions were asked to the informants during the interview:

- a. Which factor(s) influenced you to get admission into the course? Did this phenomenon affect your performance in the course later?
- b. What was your expectation from the BFLC course? To what extent has your expectation been fulfilled?
- c. Which factors offered you a positive experience in the course? Could you please elaborate on them in detail?
- d. Which factors prevented you from receiving quality teaching in the course?
- e. What is your overall satisfaction level with the programme? If satisfactory, why? If not satisfactory, why?
- f. Which factors could have offered you more positive experiences in the course?
- g. Which recommendations would you like to make for the betterment of this course?

As an ethical consideration, the researcher explained the purposes of the study and asked them to give their consent by signing before

the interview, and asked to give oral consent during the recording of the interview.

Creswell (2007) clearly states that “checking for any possible misinformation that stems from distortions introduced by a researcher and an informant” (p.207) can help ensure the trustworthiness of a research.” Therefore, after transcribing and analysing the data, the researcher got it verified by the participants.

Research Bias

The researcher intentionally “set aside ...[his] experiences and suspended ...[his] beliefs to take a fresh perspective based on data collected from persons who have experienced the phenomenon” (Ary et al., 2010, p.473) and focused on only those stated by the participants (Henfield et al., 2013).

Data Analysis

The data have been analysed using qualitative methods depending on the nature of the data. First, the interview data were transcribed by the author using denaturalised transcription methods. During the data transcription process, the data were anonymised. The vague description of the persons involved in the interview ensured that no individual could be recognised from the data. Initially, the analysis involved immersion in the data on an individual case-by-case basis through multiple readings of the transcriptions. The author annotated the texts and put exploratory comments on the margin. The annotation was done in isolation without reference to the content of other interviews. Later, the author used these notes to identify emergent subthemes. Once all the texts were annotated, the author used these notes to identify the emergent subthemes. Upon identifying all the subthemes, they were added to a theme

log. Finally, the subthemes were clustered together, and several superordinate themes were identified. These themes were then discussed in the findings and discussion section of this article.

Findings

The themes are presented in the following sections according to the research questions of this study. Before presenting the main findings, which have emerged from the interview analysis, a profile of the informants and the duration of the interview have been presented below to better understand the phenomenon under study.

Background information of the interviewees

It is evident from the table 1 that none of the participants had any initial motivation to study B.A. in French Language and Culture. They got admission into the course because they could not get any other subject to study. After getting admission into the course, their main targets included developing linguistic competence in French for pursuing higher studies in Francophone countries, getting jobs in international organisations, or working for the UN. The majority of the informants opined that they were most frustrated with their course because it failed to fulfil their target. Out of seven interviewees, only two have mentioned that the course has fulfilled more than 50 per cent of their initial expectations.

Table 1: Background information of the interviewees

Informants (Pseudonym used)	Sex	Enrolment in MA in FLC	Initial interest to study FLC	Initial target	Level of satisfaction	Associated with job using French Language	Duration of interview
Mihir	Male	Yes	No	Becoming competent in French for pursuing higher studies in Francophone Studies	Not fulfilled	Part-time teacher in a public university	57 minutes 22 seconds
Robin	Male	Yes	No	Getting support for civil service job	50% fulfilled	N/A	68 minutes 37 seconds
Rasel	Male	No	No	Getting support for jobs	60% fulfilled	N/A	65 minutes 34 seconds
Sumon	Male	Yes	No	Becoming a French teacher or working for UN	70% fulfilled	N/A	90 minutes 12 seconds
Sumi	Female	No	No	Becoming a university teacher or working for an international NGO	Not fulfilled	Part-time teacher of French in a military-run college.	64 minutes 30 seconds
Rumi	Female	Yes	No	Equal development of all four skills of languages	20-25% fulfilled	Full-time teacher in an international school.	47 minutes 50 seconds
Mina	Female	Yes	No	Enhancing French language skills	50% fulfilled	N/A	77 minutes 46 seconds

Major Themes

The reading of the interview transcription, again and again, led to the identification of several subthemes. The subthemes were clustered together to identify the major themes. All the major themes have been categorised into two super-ordinate themes: positive aspects and negative aspects.

Positive Aspects

Supportive academic environment

The class size was very small. The maximum number of students in each batch is 25 students. Since the informants were the first batch of the BFLC programme, only 9 students got admitted. Having a small number of students in a class offered several advantages such as personalised attention, more interaction with peers and instructors, more hands-on assignments, better comprehensive feedback to each student, better classroom management etc.

Our class size was very small. It was easier for our teachers to conduct more hands-on practice, pair work, and group works. We could ask a lot of questions and the teachers could pay attention to all of our queries. Besides, all of us could sit in the front row and thus could listen to the sound. (Sumi)

Because of the small class size, the teachers could pay attention to our individual needs. (Mihir).

The classroom environment is very congenial for teaching-learning activities. The rooms are clean, well-ventilated, well-lit, and decorated with materials for peripheral learning. Besides, the classrooms contain small moveable chairs, multimedia, and

internet facilities to facilitate group work and the use of educational technology more effectively.

I have never felt anything bad about the classrooms. (Mihir)

I like room no 229 because it is well-lit and nicely decorated. There is also a great natural view through the window. (Sumi)

Prospect of employment opportunities

Another important positive aspect of the BFLC programme is the greater prospects of employment. Almost each of the interviewees attested to the fact that there is a great demand for experts in French in Bangladesh, especially for teaching French in English medium schools and different universities. Even when they were in the 3rd year and 4th year, some of them could get several opportunities to do several part-time jobs and earn extra money. Thus, successful completion of a Bachelor in French Language and Culture offers huge prospects of employment.

I got an opportunity to work as a French interpreter at the 45th OIC (Organisation of the Islamic Countries) conference while some of my classmates worked as tourist guides and interpreters with different international delegates. Now I am working as a part-time teacher in a college. Getting a part-time job before finishing my studies is a very positive side of the BFLC programme. (Sumi)

Because of studying Bachelor in French Language and Culture, I along with my classmates got both part-time and contractual jobs in different organisations. These part-time jobs increased our motivation to pay more attention to our studies. (Rumi)

Co-curricular activities

BFLC offers several co-curricular activities, which are very helpful for enhancing learners' achievements. In addition to classroom teaching and learning activities, the learners were asked to watch several French movies, which were followed by in-depth critical discussion. Furthermore, the students were asked to translate *The Cantatrice Chauve* written by Eugène Ionesco. The learners translated the play and performed it six times in different public places including at Alliance Française de Dhaka and National Shilpakala Academy. All these co-curricular activities greatly enhanced the learners' confidence, self-esteem, knowledge and expertise.

We participated in several co-curricular activities such as translation of plays, participation in Francophone cultural programmes, French Dictation competition, French Song competition etc. Because of that, we had to study a lot outside our coursework. These not only helped our learning of French in a better way but also increased our confidence and enhanced our self-esteem. (Mihir)

The co-curricular activities provided us with a platform to complement and supplement our course studies. I improved my pronunciation by participating in the recitation competition, enhanced my vocabulary, and overcame my anxiety about learning French. (Rumi)

Access to teaching staff

All the interviewees unanimously opined that they had very good access to the full-time teachers of the department. Most of the teachers are student-friendly. The students received guidance not only on academic issues but also on learners' personal,

psychological, and even family issues. The teachers are positive, optimistic, compassionate, and supportive.

The teachers made us feel like a family. I cut a poor figure in the second semester. I felt very depressed. However, one of my class teachers provided me with psychological support and helped me regain my confidence. (Sumi)

Library and A/V centre

The students of the BFLC programme were given a smart ID card so that they could borrow books and read them inside the library of the Institute of Modern Languages. Students could study in the library from 9 am till 5 pm. Besides, they were given access to the audio-visual centre (A/V centre) of the institute so that they could listen to French-related audio recordings and watch video materials.

Negative Aspects

Lack of syllabus and curriculum

The analysis of interview data identified the absence of complete syllabi for all the courses taught as well as a curriculum of the overall programme. Due to the lack of both a well-developed curriculum and syllabus, most of the teachers did not have any clear guidance on what to teach, how much to teach, how to evaluate, and how to grade. Most of the interviewees opined that the lack of syllabus and curriculum had negatively affected the teaching/learning practices of IML and learners' achievement.

“Several teachers would often say that whatever [s/he] had taught that was the syllabus and we would get all the questions common from those limited number of topics. These limited number of

topics helped us get good marks in the final exam, but it hardly enhanced our knowledge.” (Rahim)

“Only two teachers gave us syllabi for 3 courses out of 32 courses.” (Sumon)

“The teacher did not provide us with any syllabus. We did not know which topics would be covered in the course. So, we could not do any self-study. The teachers would pick the topics according to their whim.” (Mihir)

Poor course selection

The learners were also not happy about the courses offered in the department. Almost all of them opined that there were several courses, which seemed inappropriate for this programme. The name of the programme Bachelor in French Language and Culture suggests that the majority of the courses will focus on the French language and culture. However, scrutiny suggests that almost half of the courses were not related to this course. For example, there were two foundation courses in English, two foundation courses in Bengali, five courses in Linguistics etc.

“I think the four foundations courses in Bengali and English were unnecessary because of our academic background. The content of those courses was hardly practical. There were also a lot of courses of linguistics” (Sumi)

“The topics covered in the foundation courses were not pertinent to our level. They could have taught us Bengali for official purpose or English for academic writing or special purpose.” (Rahim)

Poor course content

Almost all the students were not happy about the content covered in the courses. They think that the teachers could cover more topics in each course and teach the topics more deeply. However, due to the teachers' irregularity, lack of professionalism, and punctuality, they would not cover the ideal number of topics to be taught at the undergraduate level.

In several courses, the course teachers could cover only 40% of the targeted topics they wanted to teach in the semester. Sometimes they would take several make-up classes towards the end of the semester and end the course abruptly.” (Rumi)

Some of the course teachers did not have any pre-plan regarding the topics to be taught. They would come to the class and search online for relevant videos. (Sumi)

Lack of adequate number of expert teaching staff

One of the biggest challenges of the BFLC programme is the lack of sufficient numbers of teachers. The weekly total class load of the department is 120 hours. However, there are currently only 5 full-time teachers and one of them is on leave for higher studies. Some teachers have to teach more than 20 hours per week. Hence, they remain very exhausted and cannot focus on innovation and proper preparation for a good class.

“The department needs around 12-15 full-time teachers, while there are only four of them. A good number of the courses are taught by part-time guest teachers.” (Rahim)

“Approximately 40-50% of the teachers lacked professional attitude and dedication. They would not come to the class on time. Sometimes these teachers would cancel the classes without

informing us. We would wait for a long time.... They would leave the class by giving us an in-class reading task.” (Mina)

Lack of proper use of educational technology

Most of the faculty members did not use educational technology to facilitate teaching and learning. This phenomenon affected the need of the digital generation. While some teachers used technology in the class, it was not well-planned. Again, the department does not subscribe to any educational software and programmes. Hence, most of the faculty members offer courses in a traditional way.

“Only 30 per cent of the teachers [including part-time teachers] regularly took recourse to technology for facilitating teaching and learning.” (Rumi)

“Most of the teachers did not use any technology to assist teaching and learning. Only 30% of the teachers [including part-time teachers] regularly used PowerPoint slides, YouTube videos, audio recordings and overhead projectors.” (Rasel)

Lack formative assessment

BFLC programme is marked by only summative assessment. There is hardly any formative assessment. Hence, the learners get neither any constructive feedback nor any feed-forward for their achievement and performance.

“Most of the assessments were summative assessments. But I think formative assessment is very essential for accelerating learning.” (Rumi)

Lack of reliability and validity of the testing

Most of the interviewees opined that the testing instruments lacked validity and reliability. Many of the courses were not taught properly. Even though the teaching hour for each course is 60 hours, several course teachers did not teach even one-fourth of the total teaching hours. Many of them covered only a small part of the topics and developed testing instruments based on the limited number of topics which had been covered in the class. As a result, the learners have failed to learn what they were supposed to learn in those courses. Again, the interviewees insinuated that the teachers were grading their scripts subjectively, not against some established parameters. So, it can be concluded that both testing instruments and measurement patterns lacked validity and reliability.

The course teachers could not often finish teaching all the required topics. The question papers often included questions from the limited number of topics covered during the semester. So, achievement test failed to identify the level-based achievement of the learners and thus the grades do not reflect learner's real achievement" (Rasel)

"The achievement tests of the listening and speaking courses were not valid at all." (Sumi)

Lack of equal focus on all the four skills

Unfortunately, there was not an equal focus on the four skills of the French language. The major focus was given to only reading and writing skills. Speaking and listening were largely ignored. It is expected that the learners of the BFLC programme will be very fluent in all four skills. However, due to the nature of the

achievement test (final examination), class activities mostly focused on reading and writing.

They followed the grammar-translation method. They paid more attention to writing and reading. I think if they had used French as a mode of giving lectures it would have automatically improved learners' speaking and listening skills. (Mihir)

We had a course entitled Listening and Speaking but only 15-20 marks were assigned for speaking. This situation affected our motivation for improving our speaking skills.” (Rahim)

Teacher's absenteeism

Few teachers were not regular in taking classes. They hardly took a class on time. They did not follow the class routine. According to the students, even though the classes were two hours long, they would come almost one hour late and sometimes would leave the class early. Again, most of the time they used to respond to phone calls for a long time and thus hampered the classroom teaching.

Almost half of the teachers did not come to the class on time. Sometimes they would miss classes in a row and would hardly offer makeup classes. (Mihir)

Some of the teachers would not come to the class on time. They would not also cover the topics properly. (Mina)

Poor methods and approaches to teaching

The teachers did not follow any effective teaching method. According to the interviewees, the teachers followed teacher-centred and GTM methods. Most of the interaction was initiated and led by the teacher.

The language teachers were mostly using the Bengali language in French class, which is ok for the first-year students. However, I think the language teachers should use the target language from the second year. (Mihir)

Most of the teachers followed GTM for teaching French. I think they should change the method for the betterment of the students. (Sumon)

Lack of accountability of the teachers

All the seven interviewees unanimously maintained that there was a lack of accountability of the teaching staff. The interviewees mentioned that there was neither any student evaluation of the courses and course teachers nor any peer observation or peer feedback or monitoring by the authority. Hence, few teachers took advantage of it. They did not take classes properly. They did not follow any lesson plan or syllabus. The class management of these teachers was also frustrating.

Most of the time the concerned authority was aware of what was going on with particular courses, but they seemed to have ignored this for some unknown reasons. (Rahim)

Sometimes guest teachers from other departments taught several courses. One of them taught us linguistics and I did not understand anything of what he taught. (Rumi)

Discussion

The findings suggest that the BFLC programme has several positive aspects as well as several serious negative aspects, which need to be mended. All the interviewees unanimously said that they are content with the class size. The small class size is congenial for foreign language teaching. Small class size helps the

teachers manage the class properly and take proper attention to the needs of each student. Similar to the findings of Harfitt's (2012) study, the findings of this study identified that a strong sense of security within their classroom community seemed to weaken students' fears of negative evaluation from their peers and teachers.

A literature review has demonstrated that motivation is a crucial factor in learning a foreign language. However, the data analysis of this study revealed that none of the students had any initial motivation for studying French. They got admission to the department because the admission committee assigned these courses according to their merit position in the admission test. This finding is similar to the findings of Wagba's (2010) study. This phenomenon negatively affected students' performance initially. Enhancing the learners' language-related values and attitudes and increasing the learners' expectancy of success would be very effective to increase learners' motivation. Change in the admission process could also be a good solution to the problem of highly motivated learners. The interviewees also opined that the authority should not assign students randomly to study French. Rather they should work arm-in-arm with the French department to find the highly motivated students for studying French. Then the learners' performance and achievement will increase significantly.

According to Norris (2016), before developing a new programme, it is the primary task to conduct a need assessment to understand who the clients and other stakeholders of the programme are, what their expectations from the programme may be, and what kinds of programme activities may best foster desired outcomes. No such needs assessment was conducted in this context. The intermittent

need analysis could be conducted to understand learners' needs to offer a better learning experience to the learners.

The lack of syllabus and curriculum is a great setback for the BFLC programme. All the interviewees mentioned that the authority should develop a comprehensive curriculum and syllabus for each course and distribute them among the students at the beginning of the course, which will improve learners' performance and also help the teachers budget their teaching time in a more organised and effective way.

Thirdly, the learners are not happy with the courses offered in the programme. They expected to study more courses on French language and Francophone studies. However, almost half of the courses do not belong to the French language course. There exists a dominance of courses related to linguistics. Most of the courses are taught either in English or in Bengali. The majority of the learners opined that the course content did not reflect the name of the programme. Hence, it can be concluded that the courses fail to meet the expectation and needs of the learners. The authority needs to revisit the necessity of the courses offered.

The study revealed that the class activities were teacher-centred. The research study by Zohrabi et al. (2012), Mutlaq-Al-Zu'be (2013), Geisli (2009), and Gravoso and Pasa (2008) on the investigation of teacher-centred and student-centred learning showed that despite the strengths and weaknesses of both teacher-centred and student-centred method, the student-centred approach was recognised as more suited for teaching a foreign language and for quality learning. The data suggest that the BFLC programme is more teacher-centred. Learner-centred teaching style focuses on how students learn instead of how teachers teach (Weimer, 2002, Wohlfarth et.al, 2008). In a learner-centred classroom, teachers

abandoned lecture notes and PowerPoint presentations for a more active, engaging, collaborative style of teaching (Wohlfarth et.al, 2008).

The materials used in the course were not satisfactory at all. The data of the study revealed the teachers depended too much on the prescribed textbooks only for teaching the French language. The quality of the textbooks was not up to the mark. Even though the materials for reading and writing were acceptable, there is a significant lack of listening and speaking materials. The interview result suggests that the teachers should pay equal focus on the four skills of French. They can either develop effective materials for teaching and practising listening and speaking or can purchase already developed materials for practising these two skills.

The lack of an adequate number of faculty members has also been found a setback for this programme. Because of the shortage of full-time faculty members, the department appoints several guest teachers on a part-time basis. The interview data demonstrated that the majority of the students are not happy with the performance of these teachers. The guest teachers come from other departments of the university or other organisations. The students hardly get any interaction with these teachers outside their classrooms. However, there is no monitoring and supervision of this. Hence, the students think that the department should have permanent faculty members. They suggest that 12-15 in-house teachers will be sufficient to meet the need of the students. The concerned authority needs to consider this issue and take proper measures.

The findings also imply that the test administered in the departments are not reliable. In addition, it indicates that some of the teachers are not either familiar with the testing methods and

principles or they are not administering the quality tests and making reliable assessments deliberately. It can be easily assumed that the lack of reliable tests and assessments will have a very significant negative impact in the long run.

Besides, the irregularity and unpunctuality of the faculty members expose the lack of professionalism of the teachers. However, it is very overwhelming to see that several teachers are not dedicated and professional in their teaching activities. They taught one-fourth of the target topics and offered tests on only those limited number of the subject areas and deprived the learners of learning the topics they should have learnt in the courses.

The focus on only summative assessment is not a healthy practice at all. The continual formative assessment with proper feedback/feedforward is very essential for assisting the learners to develop their communicative and linguistic competence.

It is expected that a student completing undergraduate studies in French Language and Culture would develop both communicative and linguistic competence in French. However, the information provided by the learners shows that the students have failed to develop the expected level of linguistic and communicative competence in French largely due to poor teaching practices and poor focus on speaking and listening. Most of the language teachers were using the traditional Grammar Translation Method (GTM). However, to facilitate proper learning of French, the teachers could shift the paradigm of teaching and move to more pragmatic and effective language teaching, methodologies such as task-based learning, CLT, or eclectic method. Constructivists suggest a pedagogical design that leads to real-life social interactions, embedded learning, self-directed learning, and student-centred learning can foster positive learning experiences

and achievement (Huang, Rauch, & Liaw, 2010). While there has been a wide range of inclusion of educational technology for teaching languages worldwide, most of the French teachers were either incompetent in incorporating effective technology in language teaching or reluctant to do so.

Limitation

This study has several limitations. First, this phenomenological study recruited only seven informants for one batch. The sample size is indeed small but for qualitative research, this is an acceptable size. Second, this study focussed on the learner's lived experiences. So, all the themes discussed in the findings and discussion section emerged from the information reported by the interviewees. After the analysis of the data, an FGD could have been conducted to validate the findings. It would also have been better to get the faculty members' opinion to compare and examine the validity of the information provided by the interviewees.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This phenomenological study enabled the researcher to fully investigate the prevalent pros and cons of the newly introduced undergraduate programme in French Language and Culture at the University of Dhaka. The analysis of the interview data revealed that a Bachelor in French Language and Culture at the Institute of Modern Language is a very new programme wrought with several problems including poor teaching staff, lack of syllabus and curriculum, effective method of teaching, poor incorporation of educational technology and so on. Given the educational policy and the job prospect, there is a growing demand for the studies of French language and francophone studies. Hence, the authority should take immediate steps to resolve the existing challenges.

Based on the literature review and analysis of the findings, the researcher suggests the following recommendations to enhance to quality of the BFLC programme:

- a. French Department should offer a departmental admission test instead of the existing central admission test to offer admission to highly motivated students. There should be a prerequisite level of French knowledge at the entry-level as well as a minimum level of linguistic competence for graduating.
- b. The department should prepare syllabus and lesson plans for each course which need to be approved by the curriculum and material development committee. The syllabus should be distributed among the students within the first week of each semester.
- c. There should be a monitoring cell that would be responsible to ensure the routine-bound regular classes, classroom management and maintenance of a proper syllabus and lesson plans.
- d. Special care should be taken to ensure equal focus on the four skills of the French language.
- e. Proper steps should be taken to hear students' voices. Formal student evaluation of the courses and course teachers should be initiated.
- f. The department should ensure equal focus on each of the four skills in classroom teaching. Besides, all four skills should be tested and evaluated equally.
- g. The concerned authority should review the necessity and effectiveness of the foundation courses and linguistics.

- h. The department should adopt more effective methods of language teaching such as the communicative method, TBLT, eclectic method, suggestopedia etc.
- i. Evaluation of the courses and teachers' performances by the students should be initiated. Anonymous online evaluation could be a very effective option.
- j. More co-curricular and extracurricular activities such as French film screening, French speaking club, French drama club, French cuisine club etc. can be introduced. These clubs can organise different French cultural activities from time to time.

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