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More Than a Decade Later: Revisiting Distance Learning of French as a Foreign Language after the Large-Scale Shift to Online Education

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Abstract

This paper revisits findings from a mixed-method study conducted between 2011 and 2015, drawing on questionnaire data from 337 respondents in Greece and Germany on distance learning of French as a foreign language (FLE). The findings showed interest in this mode of learning, particularly because of flexibility, autonomy and practical considerations. They also revealed reservations concerning lack of contact with other participants, the perceived effectiveness of distance learning and, to a much lesser extent, limited computer knowledge. These data were collected several years before the large-scale and, for a significant period, compulsory shift to online education during the COVID-19 pandemic. This shift changed the context in which the original attitudes and reservations had been expressed, as online education was implemented on a much broader scale and involved learners who might not otherwise have chosen it. The present paper returns to selected data from the original research and examines them in light of subsequent research on online foreign-language education. It explores how the motivations and reservations recorded before the widespread experience of online education can be interpreted today and which of the issues identified in the original study remain relevant. Particular attention is paid to flexibility, contact and interaction, perceived effectiveness and the changing conceptualisation of digital competence. Through this re-examination, the study seeks to clarify the significance of these pre-pandemic findings within a substantially changed educational context and to identify questions for further empirical investigation.

Keywords: *French as a Foreign Language (FLE); distance language learning; online language education; COVID-19 pandemic; digital education*

1. Introduction

When the original research began in 2011, distance foreign-language learning occupied a different position from the one it would acquire during the pandemic. The questionnaire was administered before the large-scale emergency shift to online education. Its responses capture how respondents viewed distance language learning at that particular moment, including the factors they found attractive and those that made them hesitant.

The COVID-19 pandemic abruptly changed this context. For a considerable period, large numbers of learners attended classes online without having chosen this mode of education. What happened during that period should not, however, be equated with planned distance education. Bozkurt and Sharma make an important distinction between emergency remote teaching and online education designed from the outset for distance delivery [1]. The scale and circumstances of the experience were therefore very different from those surrounding deliberately chosen distance education.

Research on distance language education also expanded considerably. In a systematic review of 197 empirical, peer-reviewed studies published between 2011 and 2020, Vorobel documents both the growth of the field and the range of methodological approaches used to investigate it [2]. More recent work has examined what happened when foreign-language education moved online on an unprecedented scale, including changes in teaching practices, learner autonomy and teacher-learner rapport [3].

The case of FLE deserves attention within this broader literature. Research conducted before and during the pandemic has examined distance FLE in different institutional settings. Grenaudier-Klijn and Perthuis, for example, described the use of synchronous oral tutorials and asynchronous written work in university-level distance FLE in New Zealand, highlighting both the possibilities of digital tools and their limitations [4]. During the pandemic, Chao Chao et al. examined the experiences of 101 university

students of French after their courses moved online [5]. Their findings illustrate a mixed experience, with positive aspects such as creativity and cooperation alongside screen fatigue, stress and increased workload. These studies do not provide a direct comparison with the earlier data examined here, but they show how questions surrounding online FLE became more concrete as learners and teachers gained direct experience of it.

This gives us a reason to return to data collected before the pandemic. Some of the issues expressed by participants at the time as motivations or reservations later became research questions in their own right. The point is not to suggest that the original study anticipated subsequent developments. Rather, the temporal distance makes it possible to examine how concerns already visible before the large-scale experience of online education resurfaced in later research and came to be investigated in more specific terms.

The present paper addresses two research questions: (1) How can the main motivations and reservations regarding distance language learning identified in the 2011-2015 study be interpreted in the context that emerged after the large-scale adoption of online education? (2) Which of the issues identified in the original study remain salient in subsequent research on online foreign-language education? The contribution of this re-examination lies in tracing continuity across two markedly different educational contexts without treating later constructs as equivalent to the categories measured in 2013.

2. Methodological Framework

The original research was conducted as part of a doctoral study on online foreign-language learning, with particular emphasis on French as a Foreign Language (FLE) [6]. The broader doctoral research examined the field in France, Germany and Greece and combined quantitative and qualitative approaches.

The present paper draws on a specific part of that research: questionnaire data collected in Greece and Germany. A total of 337 questionnaires were collected, 210 in the Greek version and 127 in the German version, between 23 May and 2 July 2013 [6]. This distinction is important because the broader doctoral research involved three countries, whereas the questionnaire data re-examined here concern Greece and Germany.

The questionnaire addressed attitudes towards distance language learning, motivations, computer-related knowledge and skills, perceptions of its pedagogical value and related issues. The present analysis focuses primarily on the questions concerning factors that would encourage or discourage participation in an online course. These items are particularly useful for the present re-examination because they provide evidence of how prospective users perceived online learning before the large-scale experience that followed during the pandemic.

Questionnaire routing meant that the denominator varied across items. Respondents who did not express interest in an online course were routed past Questions 17–20 to Question 21; the encouraging-factor item (Q19) therefore did not use the full sample. The original published figures report rounded percentages but not item-specific valid n, so exact denominators cannot be reconstructed reliably. For Questions 19 and 21, respondents could select more than one response; percentages therefore do not sum to 100%.

The analytical procedure consists of two stages. First, selected findings from the original questionnaire are presented without altering the original categories or recalculating them on a different basis. Second, the issues emerging from these findings are examined alongside subsequent research on online foreign-language education. The later literature was selected according to three criteria: conceptual correspondence with the issues identified in the original data; relevance to foreign-language learning, with FLE-specific evidence used where available; and temporal and contextual relevance, while distinguishing deliberately designed online or blended learning from emergency remote teaching. The selected studies are used as relevant examples rather than as an exhaustive review. This is a retrospective thematic re-examination rather than a systematic review or a statistical comparison between two time points.

This distinction determines the claims that can be made. The present paper is not a longitudinal study with two measurement points, since no equivalent post-pandemic sample has completed the original questionnaire. Nor does the later literature constitute a second dataset directly comparable with the 2013 responses. The analysis can trace continuities and changes in the way particular issues are conceptualised and studied, but it cannot demonstrate that the attitudes of the original population have changed.

3. Motivations and Reservations before the Widespread Experience of Online Education

3.1 Factors Encouraging Participation in an Online Course

Among Greek respondents, practical reasons were the most frequently reported factor that would encourage participation in an online course, at 79%. Lower costs followed at 72%, flexibility at 66%, and learner autonomy at 48%. The order was different among German respondents. Flexibility ranked first at 90%, followed by practical reasons at 72% and learner autonomy at 57%, while lower costs were reported by 35% [6].

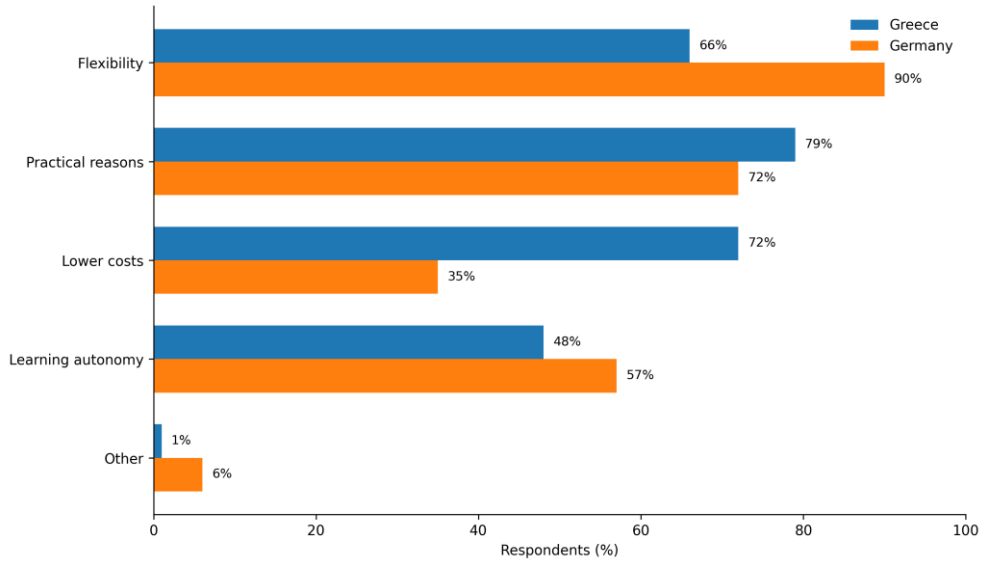


Fig. 1. Factors encouraging participation in an online course among Greek and German respondents (%). Total samples: Greece N=210; Germany N=127. Multiple responses permitted; item-specific valid n for Q19 is not reported in the original published figure. Source: Translated from Tsigara (2015).

The difference in the ordering of these responses is noteworthy. Flexibility stands out in the German group, whereas practical considerations and lower costs carry more weight in the Greek group. The available data do not provide a basis for attributing these differences to national or cultural characteristics. Such an interpretation would require evidence that the original questionnaire was not designed to provide. What the results do show is that the perceived advantages of online learning did not carry the same weight in the two groups.

The large-scale shift to online education after 2020 changed the context in which flexibility could be evaluated, but the 2013 data cannot show whether subsequent experience increased or decreased the value learners attach to it. A new sample would be required to answer that question.

3.2 Factors Discouraging Participation in an Online Course

The factors that could discourage participation are particularly relevant to a retrospective reading of the data. Lack of contact with other participants was reported by 60% of Greek respondents and 50% of German respondents. Doubts about the effectiveness of such a programme were expressed by 43% in Greece and 53% in Germany. Limited computer knowledge was much less frequently reported, at 8% and 7% respectively. Lack of confidence in the programme on offer was reported by 28% of German respondents, while none of the Greek respondents selected this option [6]. The ‘Other’ category (30% in Greece; 26% in Germany) grouped heterogeneous open-ended responses, including concerns about self-discipline, direct feedback, technical complexity, screen use, and opportunities for oral or pronunciation practice [6]. These responses were not recoded as a new analytical category in the present study.

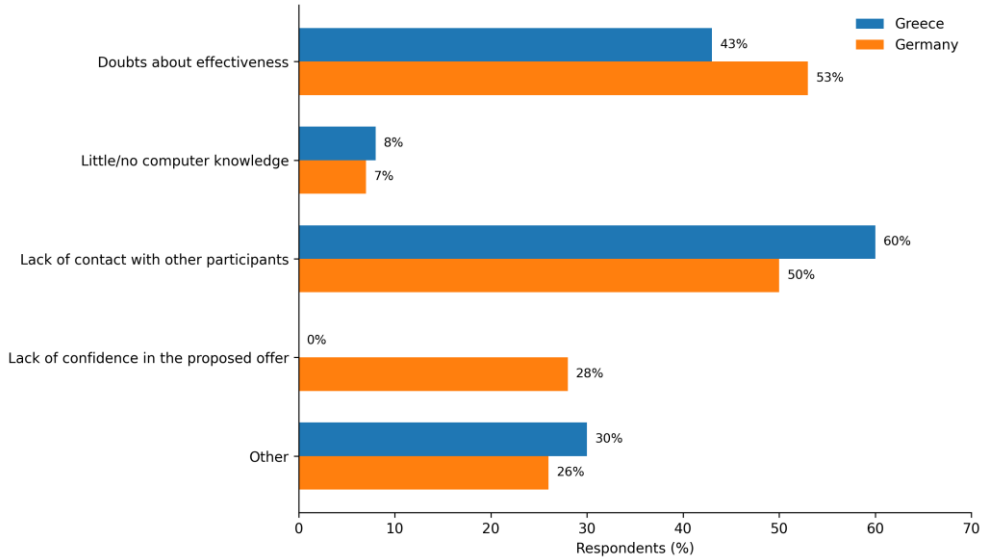


Fig. 2. Factors discouraging participation in an online course among Greek and German respondents (%). Total samples: Greece N=210; Germany N=127. Multiple responses permitted; item-specific valid n is not reported in the original published figure. Source: Translated from Tsigara (2015).

Lack of contact and doubts about effectiveness were among the most frequently selected reservations, although they concern different dimensions of the online learning experience. The first relates to communication with other people, an especially important issue in language learning. The second concerns confidence in the capacity of an online programme to achieve meaningful learning outcomes. One distinction is necessary when these findings are considered from a contemporary perspective. The original questionnaire item referring to lack of contact with other participants did not measure social presence, sense of community or interaction as these concepts are operationalised in more recent studies. Those concepts may help us interpret the earlier finding, but they cannot retrospectively be treated as equivalent to the original variable. The same caution applies to the item concerning computer knowledge, which should not be re-labelled as a measure of contemporary digital competence.

4. From Early Reservations to Later Research Questions

4.1 Contact, Interaction and Social Presence

Concern about contact did not become irrelevant as online learning technologies developed. What changed considerably was the way the issue came to be investigated. In later research, interaction, social presence, sense of community and isolation are treated as more specific conceptual and empirical constructs. A recent systematic review of online L2 learner engagement likewise shows substantial variation in how related constructs are conceptualised and operationalised, reinforcing the need to distinguish them carefully [7].

This issue was already visible in pre-pandemic FLE research. In their study of distance FLE at Massey University, Grenaudier-Klijn and Perthuis examined weekly synchronous online tutorials centred on oral communication alongside asynchronous written activities [4]. Their analysis showed that digital tools could support interaction, learner autonomy and teacher guidance, while also presenting limitations. Their study shows that questions concerning the relationship between technological access and pedagogical interaction were already being examined before the emergency transition of 2020.

The pandemic made the problem much more visible across language education. Harsch et al. examined the rapid move online of 224 language courses involving more than 2,400 students [8]. Their evaluation included responses from 898 students and 35 teachers. Among the challenges identified were difficulties in creating learning-conducive interaction, insufficient social presence and inappropriate communication channels and settings. The technical possibility of communicating does not itself ensure satisfactory interaction.

Li examined 237 EFL students in blended learning during the pandemic and considered social presence, interaction and sense of community [9]. Social presence was positively related to sense of community, while interaction mediated this relationship. These constructs offer a more differentiated framework for

examining questions of contact and participation, although they are not equivalent to the original questionnaire item.

FLE research also documents this mixed picture, although the contexts and measures differ. Chao Chao et al., in their mixed-method study of 101 university students of French during the pandemic, found that the transition to online education generated both positive experiences and significant difficulties [5]. Increased exposure to online learning did not turn the experience into a uniformly positive or negative one.

These studies cannot be directly compared with the 2013 questionnaire. Their samples, constructs and research designs differ. What matters here is that a broad concern expressed before the pandemic as lack of contact subsequently became part of a more differentiated research agenda concerning interaction, social presence and the quality of online participation.

4.2 More Communication Tools, but Not Necessarily More Contact

The technological environment of language education has expanded considerably since the early 2010s, offering multiple channels for synchronous and asynchronous participation [10]. Their availability, however, does not by itself resolve questions of contact or interaction. Recent work on language education and technology similarly stresses the need to consider technological affordances in relation to pedagogical purposes rather than as ends in themselves [10].

Bárkányi and Brash illustrate this complexity in their mixed-methods study of foreign-language speaking anxiety in online learning [11]. Survey data were collected from 307 language learners, together with in-depth group interviews involving 10 students. Breakout rooms created opportunities for spoken interaction but were also among the situations associated with speaking anxiety. Chat, in turn, could provide an alternative channel for participation.

The technological conditions for contact have expanded, but the quantity of available channels and the quality of interaction are different questions. Whether learners experience online communication as a genuine opportunity for interaction depends on how participation is organised and on the pedagogical tasks in which communication occurs [8, 10].

The distinction is particularly relevant to language learning because interaction is itself part of the learning activity. The problem identified in 2013 therefore cannot simply be classified as a technological limitation that later platforms solved. Later research suggests a shift in emphasis, from whether contact is technically possible to what kind of interaction takes place and under what conditions it supports participation [7, 8, 10].

4.3 What Do We Know about Effectiveness Today?

In 2013, effectiveness was a genuine source of hesitation. Doubts about whether an online programme could be effective were reported by 43% of Greek respondents and 53% of German respondents. In the years that followed, effectiveness became the subject of a much larger body of empirical research.

Zhou and Zhang systematically reviewed 103 empirical publications on online or blended language learning [12]. Their analysis found reports of significant improvement, qualitative progress, substantial gains or positive enhancement in 86.41% of the included studies. That figure needs to be read in context. The studies covered different technologies, instructional approaches and learning environments, and 82.52% concerned online English learning. It would therefore be inappropriate to transfer the 86.41% figure directly to FLE or to interpret it as evidence that online language education is generally effective irrespective of context.

Meta-analytic evidence also points towards a more differentiated understanding of effectiveness. Yu examined videoconferencing in second-language learning [13]. The five studies meeting the final inclusion criteria produced a weighted mean effect size of $g = 0.35$, with a 95% confidence interval of [0.06, 0.65], indicating a statistically significant positive effect on the listening and speaking outcomes examined. The evidence base was small, however, and the finding therefore warrants cautious interpretation.

Research focusing specifically on French provides a useful complement. Meritan examined an online approach to explicit French pronunciation instruction and found that the intervention supported pronunciation learning among both remotely attending and in-person students, with no observed difference between the two groups in the study [14]. This does not establish the general effectiveness of online FLE. It illustrates how the research question has become more precise: a particular instructional intervention, a particular language skill and a defined learning context can be evaluated empirically.

The broad question of whether an online programme is effective, understandable from the perspective of a respondent in 2013, is therefore insufficient for much of the evidence now available. More informative questions concern what works, for which language skill, with which learners, through which instructional design and under what conditions.

4.4 From Computer Knowledge to Digital Competence

Limited computer knowledge carried considerably less weight in the original survey than concerns about contact or effectiveness. It was reported by approximately 8% of Greek respondents and 7% of German respondents. The wording of the item also reflects the period in which the questionnaire was designed. "Little or no computer knowledge" describes a much narrower issue than what is now understood by digital competence.

The difference is even clearer in DigComp 3.0, the latest edition of the European Digital Competence Framework [15]. It retains a broad, multidimensional understanding of digital competence while updating the framework to reflect recent technological and societal developments, including the transversal integration of AI competence. Digital competence is therefore not reducible to knowing how to operate a computer or access an online platform.

This conceptual shift has consequences for the interpretation of the original finding. The 7% and 8% figures from 2013 cannot be used to estimate how many respondents possessed, or lacked, digital competence in the contemporary sense. That was not what the questionnaire measured. The older item nevertheless provides a useful historical marker: the potential barrier was formulated in terms of basic computer knowledge, whereas the contemporary framework encompasses a much wider range of knowledge, skills and attitudes [15].

This is also one of the clearest examples of why a direct numerical comparison between 2013 and the present would be methodologically problematic without a carefully designed new study. Retaining the original item in a future questionnaire would preserve historical comparability, while adding contemporary digital-competence measures would capture dimensions that the earlier instrument could not have addressed.

5. Discussion

The first research question concerned how the motivations and reservations identified in the original study can be interpreted after the large-scale adoption of online education. The later literature changes the context in which the 2013 findings can be read, but it does not change what those findings measured. Flexibility, practical considerations, lower costs and autonomy were already valued before online learning became a widespread experience. The pandemic subsequently exposed a much broader population to learning without physical co-presence. This places the earlier responses in a different context, but it does not allow us to infer that contemporary learners value these factors more strongly. The distinction between voluntary distance learning and emergency remote teaching is important here [1]. Experience gained under emergency conditions cannot simply be treated as experience of deliberately designed online education.

Lack of contact was one of the strongest concerns in the original data, and later research did not make the issue disappear. Instead, it examined the problem through more specific constructs, including interaction, social presence, sense of community and the organisation of synchronous communication [8, 9]. FLE research also shows that digital environments can create opportunities for synchronous and asynchronous participation while retaining limitations that depend on how those environments are used [4]. The main change, then, is not the disappearance of the original concern but the greater precision with which it can now be studied.

The same caution applies to effectiveness. The broad reservation expressed by participants in 2013 has been followed by research examining measurable outcomes in specific online and blended settings. Systematic and meta-analytic evidence shows that positive outcomes are frequently reported, but it does not justify treating online delivery as inherently effective across contexts [12, 13]. The FLE pronunciation study is useful precisely because its claim is narrower: it evaluates a defined form of instruction for a particular aspect of French learning [14].

The second research question asked which issues identified in the original study remain salient in subsequent research. Contact and interaction clearly do, although they are now conceptualised more precisely. Effectiveness remains central, but is increasingly investigated at the level of particular skills, interventions and learning conditions. Digital competence also remains relevant, although the construct itself has expanded substantially since the original questionnaire was designed.

The re-examination therefore reveals continuity without equivalence. Similar concerns can be recognised across the two periods, but neither the educational environment nor the research concepts have remained unchanged. Treating later concepts as if they were identical to the original questionnaire categories would create an artificial longitudinal comparison. Treating the two periods as entirely unrelated, on the other hand, would overlook the fact that several concerns expressed by prospective distance learners before the pandemic continued to be investigated in later research.

For current pedagogical practice, the re-examination points to several priorities rather than prescribing a single model. Flexibility needs to be considered alongside pedagogical structure; opportunities for interaction depend on task design and participation formats; and claims about effectiveness are more informative when tied to particular skills, learners and learning conditions. Learner support should also address contemporary digital competence rather than only basic technical access. These implications are particularly relevant to FLE, given the continuing predominance of English in the broader evidence base on online language learning [7, 12].

Much of the broader evidence base on online language learning still concerns English. FLE-specific studies are available, but they cover different populations, skills and educational settings [4, 5, 14]. They strengthen the relevance of the present re-examination without providing a basis for broad generalisation. The imbalance itself indicates a need for further empirical research specifically concerned with online FLE.

6. Limitations and Directions for Further Research

The principal limitation of the present study is the absence of a new sample directly comparable with the 2013 respondents. The analysis therefore cannot establish whether learner attitudes changed after the pandemic or, if they did, in what direction. The temporal framing of the paper refers to the retrospective perspective from which the earlier findings are reconsidered, rather than to a longitudinal follow-up of the original participants.

Conceptual comparability presents a second limitation. Lack of contact with other participants in the original questionnaire is not equivalent to social presence or sense of community as these are defined and measured in more recent research. Likewise, little or no computer knowledge is not equivalent to the contemporary multidimensional concept of digital competence. The relationships drawn in this paper are interpretative links between earlier findings and later research, not comparisons between identical variables.

The literature used for the re-examination also has limitations. Its selection was based on relevance to the analytical issues rather than on a systematic-review protocol. Studies vary considerably in population, target language, instructional mode and research design. Some concern deliberately designed online courses, others blended learning, and others the emergency transition during the pandemic. These contexts cannot be collapsed into a single category of online learning. Moreover, English remains dominant in the international evidence base. In Zhou and Zhang's review, 82.52% of the included studies concerned online English learning [12]. Findings from this literature can inform discussion of broader developments in online language education, but they cannot automatically be treated as FLE-specific evidence.

A direct continuation of the present study would therefore require new empirical data. Selected questions from the original questionnaire could be administered to a contemporary sample while retaining the original wording where comparability is methodologically useful. Contemporary measures of interaction, social presence and digital competence could then be added alongside the original items rather than substituted for them. Such a design would allow the historical comparison that the present paper deliberately does not claim to provide.

A further step would be to examine whether previous experience with online language learning influences present-day preferences. Learners who first encountered online education voluntarily may not evaluate it in the same way as those whose first substantial experience occurred under emergency conditions. Distinguishing these trajectories could help clarify whether changes in attitudes are associated with technological development, pedagogical design, accumulated experience or the circumstances under which that experience was acquired.

7. Conclusion

The original questionnaire captures a period before the large-scale emergency shift to online education. Participants saw advantages in flexibility, autonomy and practical or financial considerations. At the same time, lack of contact with other participants and doubts about the effectiveness of an online programme gave rise to clear reservations.

More than a decade later, subsequent research continues to examine several of the issues raised by those responses, although through more differentiated concepts and measures. Research on interaction, social presence and online L2 engagement has become more specific [7-9]. Effectiveness is increasingly examined in relation to particular skills, technologies and learning environments [12-14]. Digital competence now encompasses considerably more than basic computer knowledge, as reflected in the latest DigComp framework [15]. FLE-specific research also provides examples of how these broader questions operate in French-language learning contexts [4, 5, 14].

For present-day practice, the retrospective re-examination supports a cautious but practical conclusion: online FLE should not be evaluated as a single mode with fixed advantages or disadvantages. Its pedagogical value depends on how interaction is organised, which learning objectives are targeted, what forms of support are available and which digital competences participation requires. These are also the dimensions that a contemporary follow-up study should examine directly.

The comparison must nevertheless stop short of claims that the available evidence cannot support. The 2013 data do not show what learners think today, and later studies do not constitute a second wave of the original survey. What the later literature does show is how issues already present before the widespread experience of online education subsequently developed as research concerns.

A contemporary study could now repeat selected elements of the original questionnaire while adding measures suited to current digital learning environments. This would make it possible to move from retrospective interpretation to direct temporal comparison and to establish which learner perceptions have changed, which have persisted, and how experience of online language education since 2020 may have contributed to those changes.

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