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Investigating Online Presence in The French Online Classroom

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Abstract
Foreign language teaching and learning have shifted from traditional physical classrooms to online classrooms. Online learning becomes a prominent learning medium and even a necessity during the recent outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the lack of students' engagement challenges the implementation of online learning. Thus, this quantitative study investigates online engagement in foreign language classrooms, especially in the French online classroom. A survey consisting of 22 items using 5-Likert scales has been given to learners studying French as a foreign language in a Malaysian public university. The theory of online learning by Anderson (2008) and online engagement by Martin and Bolliger (2018) were used as the conceptual framework of this study. The survey contains four sections: demographic profile, learner-to-learner interaction, learner-to-instructor interaction, and learner-to-content interaction. The data have been collected from 151 respondents in social discipline and social sciences discipline. Findings showed that the instructors' teaching style involves the active participation of learners from the perception of learners. In addition, learners think peer support is important in motivating them to learn foreign languages. They prefer to collaborate with the chosen peer in learning activities. Last but not least, learners perceive that learning activities and the overview of learning content can improve language learning. The findings of this study shed light on the understanding of online engagement in French online classes from the learners' perspective. It may further contribute to the effect of learning activities on online engagement in foreign language learning.
Keywords: Online Learning, French Language, Foreign Language Learning, Online Engagement, Online Education

Introduction

Background of Study

Foreign language learning refers to a nonnative language learnt in an environment where it is uncommon to be used (Moeller & Catalano, 2015). Along with the breaking down of the artificial national barriers due to globalisation, foreign language learning has become a more prominent skill to communicate globally. In Malaysia, foreign language learning has been encouraged to advance human development and civilisation. The Malaysian government recognises the value of foreign language learning in striving economic and technology development. As stated in the National Higher Education Strategic Plan Beyond 2020 (MOHE, 2007), "proficiency in the third language is vital for developing human capital that drives the K-economy as well as gears the country towards competitive innovation in the international arena" (p. 62). Moreover, in a growingly diverse and borderless work environment, graduates with proficiency in a foreign language have a higher employment opportunity in Malaysia (Study Committee for the Future Direction of the Language Education in Malaysia, 2010). Hence, most Malaysian higher institutions offer foreign languages such as Japanese, Korean, French, German, Arabic, Spanish, and Italian as a compulsory or elective course. The French language has attracted much attention among the foreign languages offered in higher institutions. French is the official language of 29 countries and one of the official languages used in the United Nations. Thus, French is one of the popular foreign languages requested by students.

The paradigm of foreign language learning has been shifted from traditional formal classrooms to online learning. The rapid development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) leads to the use of online learning as a powerful learning medium in foreign language learning. Online learning is conceptualised as learning experiences through the internet synchronously or asynchronously whereby learners interact with their peers and instructors virtually, without the physical presence in the classroom (Singh & Thurman, 2019). In the synchronous online classroom, learners and educators have real-time interaction by attending live lectures. In contrast, learners learn asynchronously by relying on online learning resources and information sharing through a learning management system (LMS) anytime and anywhere (Shahabadi & Uplane, 2015). In the past two decades, the preparation and implementation of online learning in Malaysian higher institutions have been explored, especially the online learning readiness (Lau & Shaikh, 2012) and the effectiveness of online learning (Al-Rahmi et al., 2015; Wai & Seng, 2015). Several attempts have been made to incorporate online learning in the Malaysian educational system, such as implementing online learning in university distance learning courses and using various forms of technology to support the physical classroom (Rais et al., 2004). Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the Malaysian government to implement the Movement Control Order (MCO) prohibiting mass gatherings. As a result, all educational institutions have been affected and are urged to shift the teaching and learning process to online learning. Therefore, online learning is fully implemented and has become a necessity in the Malaysian educational system, including foreign language learning.

Statement of Problem

There are many benefits of learning French online, especially during a pandemic. A study by Alabay (2021) found that the students have positive feedback towards learning French online. The students highlighted that the materials in the online learning classroom are easily accessible and more affordable than the hard copies for the face-to-face class. The materials

can be accessed anytime, especially if the students missed or were unable to attend the class. The accessibility of the materials also allows students to do revision effectively as they can always refer back to the materials whenever they encounter difficulty.

Nevertheless, there are also problems with learning French online. According to Zboun (2021), the most significant problems of online learning are poor access to the internet, lack of engagement among students and teachers, and low motivation among students. In addition, a study by Harsch et al (2021) found that the teachers are faced with challenges in designing their courses due to the abrupt changes of their classroom setting, from face-to-face to fully online environments. They explained that these challenges exist due to unclear direction of the new roles of teachers and students in the online setting, lack of social presence and inappropriate communication channels and settings. Furthermore, the internet connection problem, limited resources, and lack of support to learners affect student engagement in online classes (Crawford et al., 2020). A recent study discovered that student engagement was reduced in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Chen et al., 2020). It is vital to enhance student engagement in virtual classrooms because online engagement is related strongly to learners' academic performance, learning outcomes, motivation and satisfaction, especially during the pandemic where online learning becomes a necessity. Hence, this study is done to investigate learners' perception of learning French online, especially focusing on online engagement to provide insight on how to enhance learner engagement in designing class instructions and learning activities of a foreign language online classroom. Specifically, this study is done to answer the following questions;

• How can learning French online be learner-centred? (Learner-to-instructor engagement)

• How can learning French online be community-centred? (Learner-to-learner engagement)

• How can learning French online be knowledge-centred? (Learner-to-content engagement)

Literature Review
How French is Taught
According to Wan Mohtar and Awang (2013), trained professors taught French in various courses at the National Defense University of Malaysia (NDUM). According to Wan Ikhlas, the course should be delivered in pure French rather than mixing it with another common language utilised by students, which is English.

Online learning is emerging and has become a powerful learning medium now that technology has advanced significantly. As a result, educational institutions are beginning to establish such platforms. One of the learning institutes that established an online project called Language Online is Carnegie Mellon University (LOL). This initiative provides online French language training that takes full advantage of the internet. According to Chenoweth and Murday (2003), LOL was created to appeal to students who want a more flexible learning style.

Problems Learners face in Learning French
Matter (1989) in his article "Some Fundamental Problems in Understanding French as a Foreign Language" said that one of the common stereotypes about the French language is that it is a beautiful language, but it is difficult to learn. The difficulty lies in understanding the language when it is spoken. Research done by Hassan (2015) found that the learners have

difficulties in French pronunciation because of the interference of the L1 and the spelling system in the French language, especially the French vowel sound and its spelling system. According to Mercado (2003), French has officially 16 vowel sounds and some semivowels. He added that the stress at the end of the final syllable for French word groups could make it more difficult for learners, where two or more words are pronounced as a single unit.

Theory of Online Learning

There are several characteristics of online learning that can facilitate effective learning. Anderson (2008) presented a theory of online learning in which he explained that effective learning should have overlapping components. He presented online learning as having four lenses (refer to figure 1). Community-centred is the most important component in online learning. A community-centred online class allows learners to interact with their peers and this process of interaction. Next, online learning needs to be knowledge-centred. The internet allows learners to gather resources needed in their pursuit of learning. By considering the learner-centred contexts, the teacher plays an important role to understand the needs of the learners to maximise their learning. Finally, an effective learning environment needs to be assessment-centred. This includes both formative and summative assessments that help to motivate learners to be active.
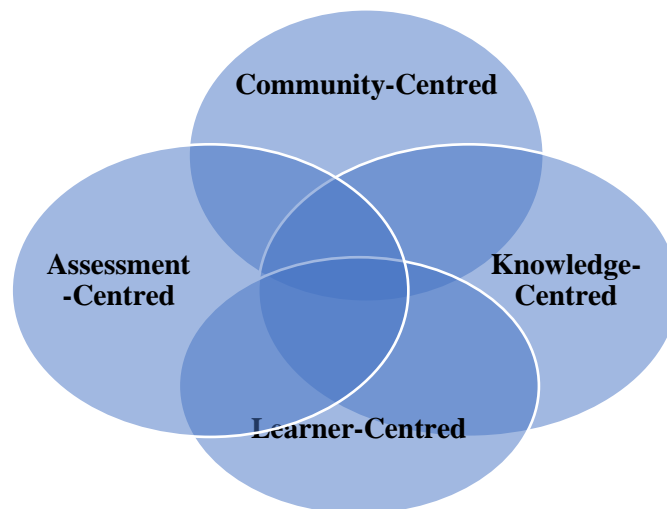

Figure 1- Four Lenses of Online Learning (Source: Anderson, 2008)

Past Studies

- Past Studies on Teaching French

Plenty of previous studies into French language learning have focused on the effect of pedagogical design on students' engagement. Rienties et al. (2018) have conducted a longitudinal study on the impact of learning design on students' online engagement. Four language modules (Beginner's French, Beginner's Spanish, Intermediate French and Intermediate Spanish) were observed, and a total of 2111 students in The Open University, United Kingdom were enrolled in the modules. The time allocated for each learning activity was measured to understand the learning design used in the modules. Moreover, the students' engagement was measured with the time spent per week and per session in the virtual classes. It was found that the assessment activities were associated positively with the time learners spent in online classes. Thus, it can be concluded that the design of learning activities influences directly the time learners spend on foreign language learning.

Another study conducted by Cruaud (2016) investigated gamification as a learning tool in the French language class and its impact on students' engagement. A gamified application was developed using the action-oriented approach emphasising the learner-centred context, student collaboration and the educator's role as facilitator. The application was used in French language classes for a year to thirteen second-year high school students in a suburb of Oslo, Norway. The video recordings of each fieldwork session and the interviews of educators and learners were collected as data. The findings showed that learners have fun playing the gamified application and are willing to create quizzes or produce text using French. Hence, this study showed that playfulness and autonomy lead to students' engagement in foreign language learning.

- Past Studies on Problems in learning French Language online

Many studies have been done to investigate the problems in learning French online. The study by Alabay (2021) found that in a distance learning setting, the students stated that learning French online was problematic due to difficulty accessing internet problems and the lack of face-to-face interaction among lecturers and students. This case study research examined the students' perceptions of the use of Microsoft Teams in learning French online. The participants of this study were 23 students learning French as a foreign language at Galatasaray University, Turkey. The data was collected through semi-structured interview forms. Findings from this study found three themes which are the reality of distance learning, the user friendliness of Microsoft Teams, and learning a foreign language online. These three themes showed that students were facing numerous issues, one of them being connectivity issues. The students complained that it was hard to access the internet as they had to share the data or devices with other family members. They also highlighted that the internet problems are due to the heavy traffic where almost everyone is required to be online for school and work. Another issue is the absence of face-to-face interaction. The students stated a need to interact face-to-face while doing speaking and reading exercises as they felt like something was missing in online interaction. Next, the study conducted by Maican and Cocoradă (2021) also looked at the issues triggered by technology and the absence of direct interaction. The focus of the study is on online foreign language learning in higher education and its correlation during the Covid-19 pandemic. Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) scale and tools developed by the authors were employed to collect quantitative data from self-selected 270 students of various study programs in a Romanian university. Then, qualitative data was collected from 39 students selected using the socio-demographic criteria gender, study programs and foreign language achievement levels. The findings revealed that students faced problems caused by technology, such as weak internet connection, e-learning platforms, and default devices. Another problem found in the study is anxiety due to the lack of direct human interaction in class. According to the students, face-to-face interaction is vital for their anxiety and academic performance.

- Past Studies on Advantages of learning French (language) online

The disadvantages of studying a foreign language online have been extensively researched. According to Maican and Cocoradă's study (2021), students have difficulty using technology, whether it is due to a poor Internet connection or malfunctioning equipment. The study looked at online foreign language learning and its relevance to the current Covid 19 epidemic using the Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) programme. Two hundred seven self-selected volunteers from various academic programmes participated in this study. To acquire

qualitative data, the number of students is lowered to 39. During the first semester of the academic year, participants submitted demographic questionnaires that included questions on their age, gender, study programme and year of study, foreign languages learned, and foreign language grade. The outcomes of this study show that negative connections between FLE and anxiety are consistent with pre-pandemic learning times, although some unexpected discoveries, such as lower-achieving students' higher level of enjoyment, are also shown. Another significant disadvantage of learning French online is isolation. E-learning hinders students from conversing with their lecturers and peers face to face.

Alabay (2021) did a study titled "Students' opinions on learning French online using Microsoft Teams®" during the Covid-19 outbreak. The participants were 23 Galatasaray University French as a Foreign Language students. A semi-structured interview form was used to gather data. Students claimed that remote learning enabled them to complete their education during an outbreak by allowing them to review and take their courses online if they were unable to attend classes.

Conceptual Framework

This study is rooted from the theory of online learning by Anderson (2008) and online engagement by Martin and Bolliger (2018). This study explores the 3 lenses of online learning by Anderson (2008) and they are (a) learner-centred, (b) community-centred and (c) knowledge-centred. In the context of this study, the three lenses from Anderson (2008) are merged with online engagement by Martin and Bollinger (2018) as presented in Figure 2 below. For the class to be learners-centred, it is up to the instructor to plan well by using learner-to-instructor engagement. Next, community-centred learning is achieved through learner-to-learner engagement. Finally, knowledge-centred is achieved through learner-to-content engagement.
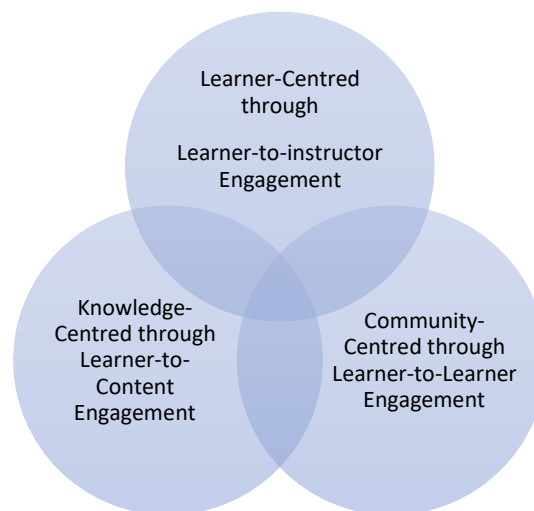

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework of the Study

Methodlogy

This quantitative research is done to investigate what motivate learners to learn online. The instrument used is a survey adapted from Martin and Bollinger (2018). 151 respondents were purposively chosen to answer the survey. The survey has 4 main sections. With reference to Table 1, section A has items on the demographic profile. Section B has 8 items on learner-to-

instructor interaction, section C has 6 items on learner-to-instructor interaction, and section D has 8 items on learner-to-content interaction.

Table 1: Distribution of Items in Instrument

SECTION	TYPE OF INTERACTION	NO OF ITEMS
B	LEARNER-TO-INSTRUCTOR INTERACTION	8
C	LEARNER-TO-LEARNER INTERACTION	6
D	LEARNER-TO-CONTENT INTERACTION	8
	TOTAL NUMBER OF ITEMS	22

Table 2- Reliability Statistics

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.923	22

Table 2 presents the reliability statistics for the instrument. SPSS analysis revealed a Cronbach alpha of .923 thus showing a high internal reliability of the instrument used. Data is collected online via goggle form. Data is then analysed using SPSS version 26. Analysed data is presented in the form of percentages and mean scores to answer the 3 research questions.

Findings
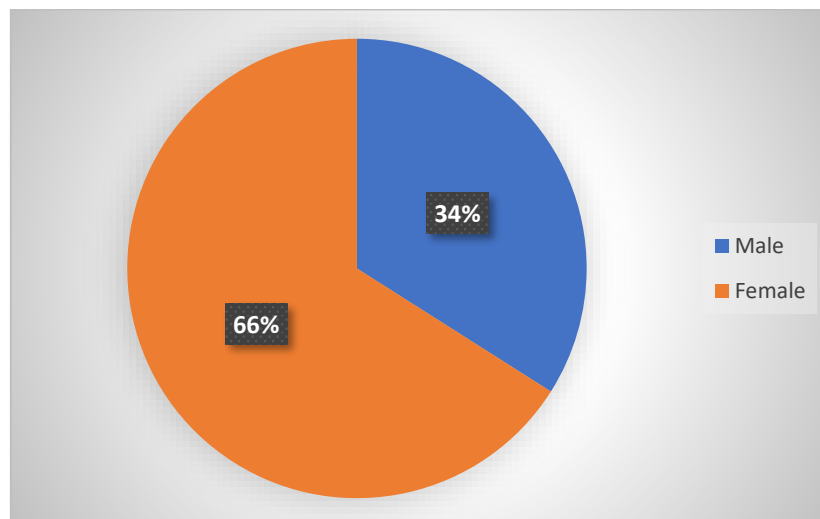Findings for Demographic Profile
Q1. Gender

Figure 3- Percentage for Gender
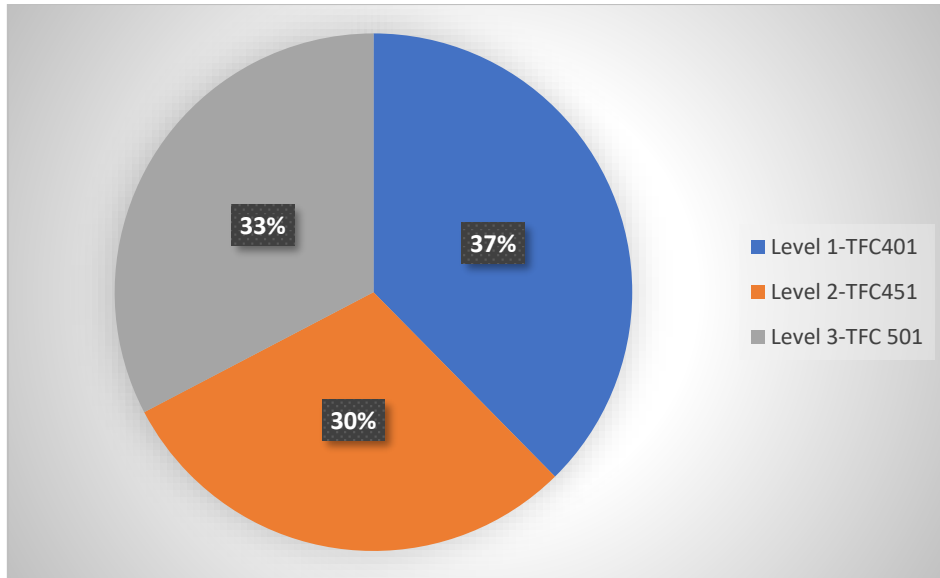Based on Figure 3, 34% of the respondents are male and 66% of them are female.
Q2 French level

Figure 4- Percentage for French Level

According to Figure 4, 38% respondents are taking French Level 1, 30% are learning French Level 2 and the rest, 33% are students from French Level 3.
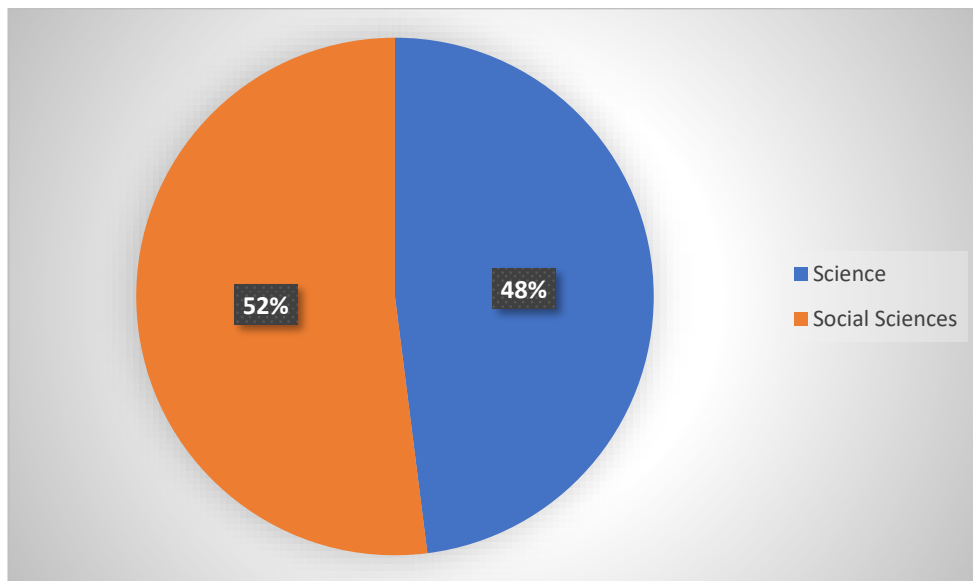
Q3. Discipline

Figure 5- Percentage for Discipline

Based on Figure 5, 48% of the respondents are from science discipline and 52% are from social science discipline.

Findings for Learner-centred through Learner-to-Instructor Engagement

This section answers the first research question: How can learning French online be learner-centered? The findings are presented by looking at Learner-To-Instructor Interaction.
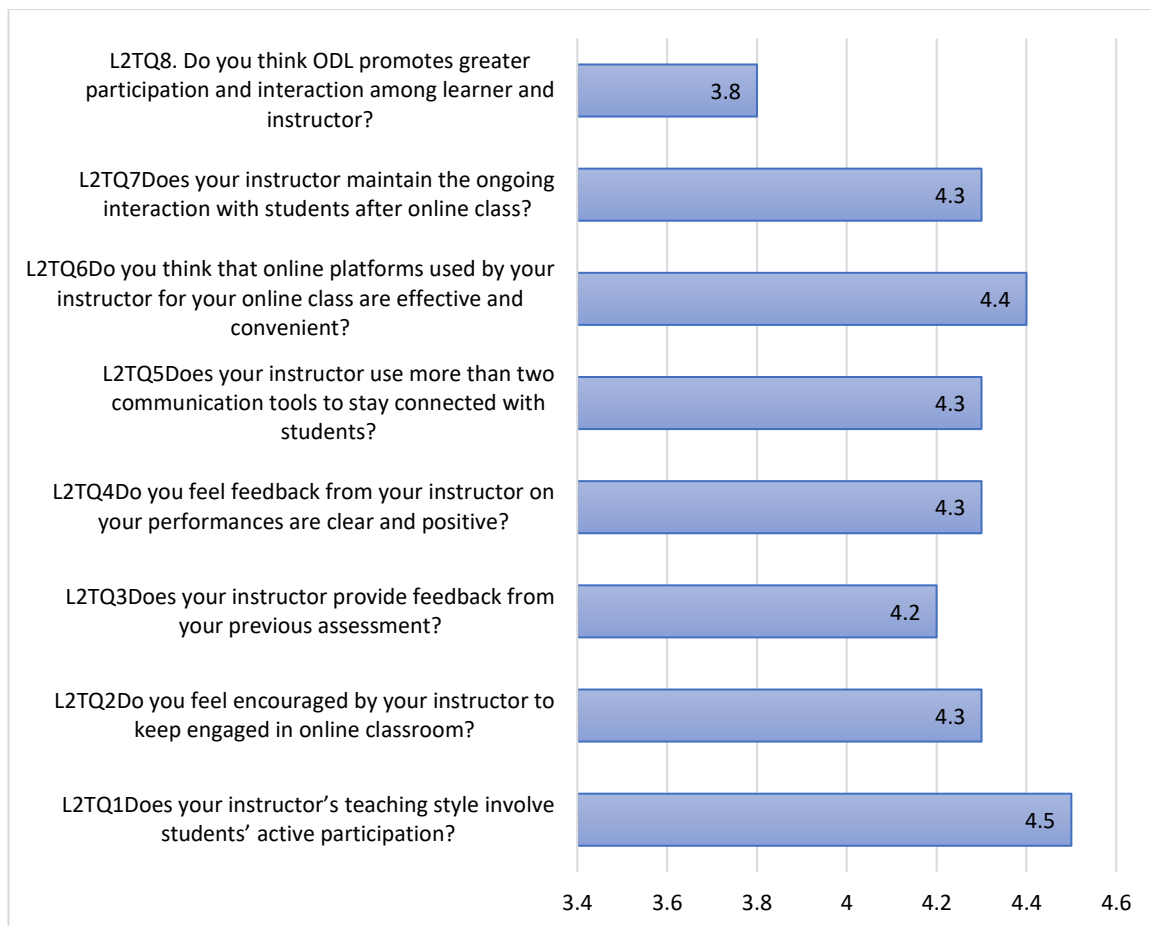
Figure 6- Mean for Learner-to-Instructor Engagement

Figure 6 presents the mean score for Learner-to-Instructor Engagement. Based on all 8 items, the mean scores ranged from 3.8 to 4.5. The item with the highest mean score was found to be item L2TQ1 (M=4.5). The data indicated that on average, the respondents strongly agreed that the instructor's teaching style involve students' active participation. On the other hand, the item with the lowest mean score was found to be item L2TQ8 (M=3.8). The data indicated that on average, the respondents agreed that ODL promotes greater participation and interaction among learners and instructors.

Findings for Community-centred through Learner-to-Learner Engagement
This section answers the second research question: How can learning French online be community-centered? The findings are presented by looking at Learner-To-Learner Interaction.
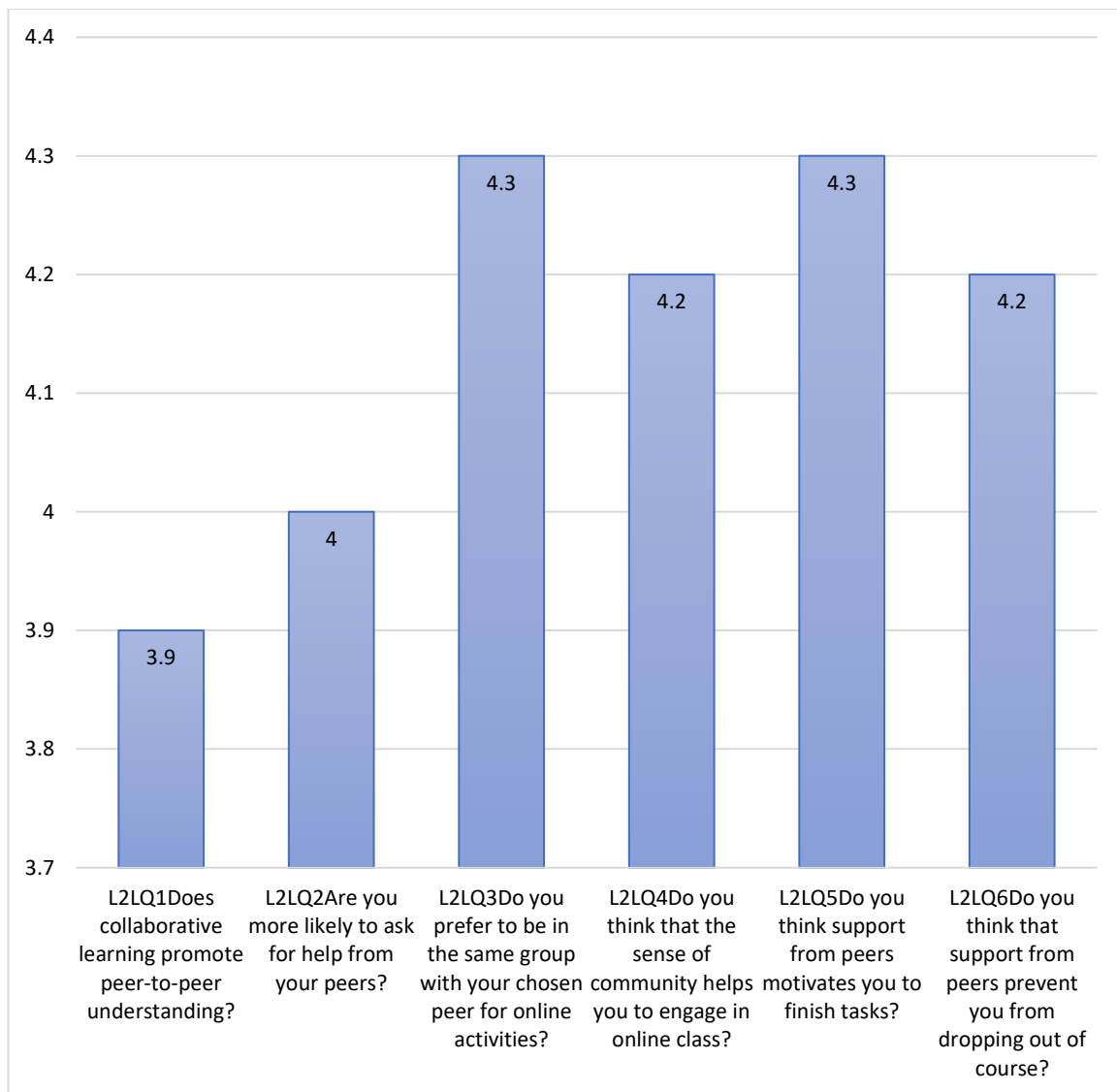
Figure 7- Mean for Learner-to-Learner Engagement

Based on Figure 7, about the learner-to-learner engagement, the items L2LQ3 and L2LQ5 record the highest mean, at 4.3. Students agreed that peers' activities could improve their understanding of online activities. They also feel that it is important to get support from peers to motivate them to finish tasks. Furthermore, they agreed that the sense of community helps them to actively engage in online class (M: 4.2) and also support from peers prevents them from dropping out of course (M: 4.2). The lowest (M: 3.9) is recorded by the item L2LQ1, that is collaborative learning promote peer-to peer understanding.

Findings for Knowledge-centred through Learner-to-Content Engagement
This section answers the second research question: How can learning French online be knowledge-centered? The findings are presented by looking at Learner-To-Content Interaction.
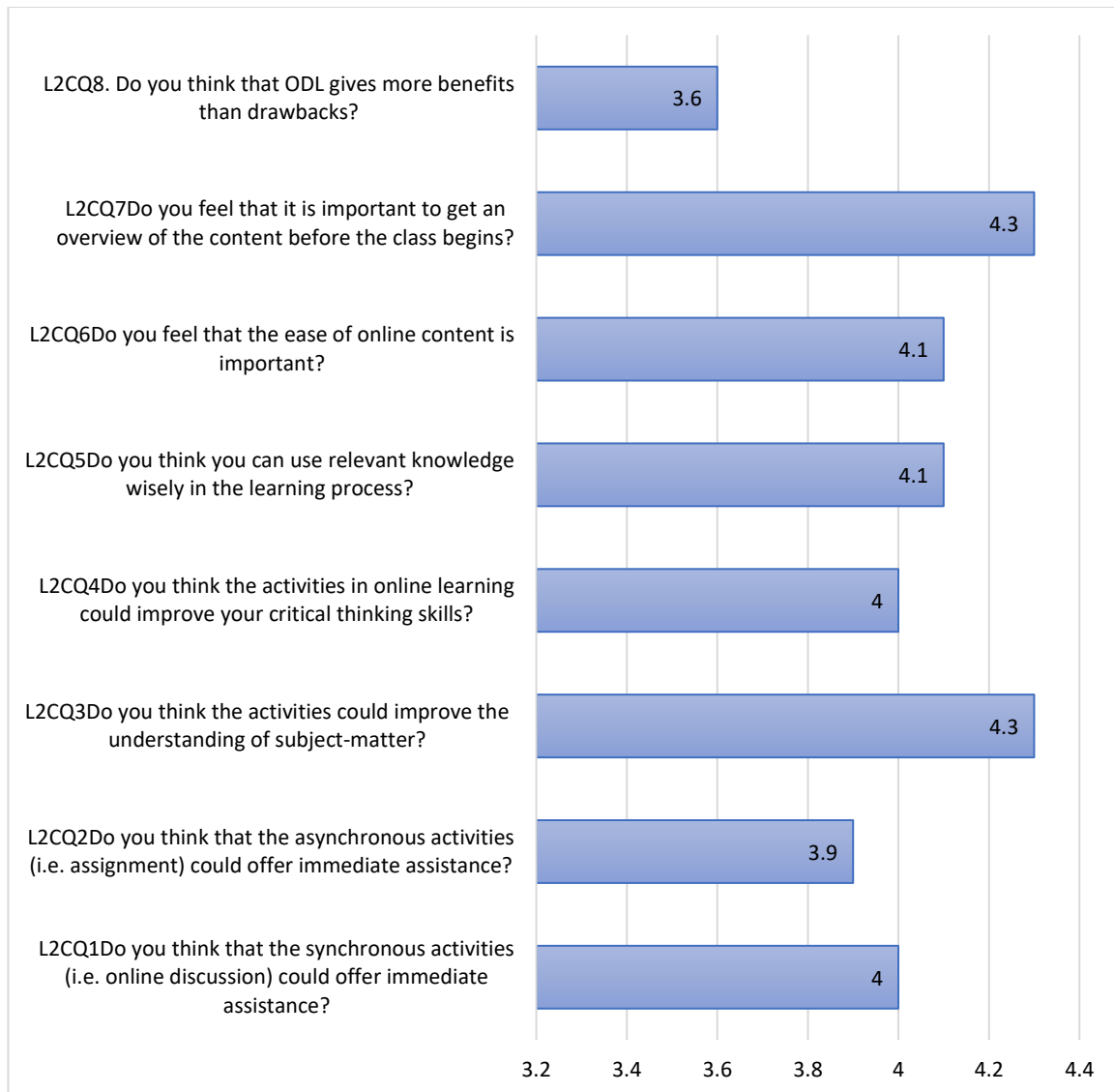
Figure 8- Mean for Learner-to-Content Engagement

Based on Figure 8, about the learner-to-content engagement, the item L2CQ3 and L2CQ7 record the highest mean, both at 4.3. Students agreed that activities could improve their understanding of the subject matter. They also feel that getting an overview of the content is important before the class begins. The lowest mean at 3.6 is recorded by the item L2CQ8, whether ODL gives more benefits than drawbacks.

Conclusion

Summary of Findings and Discussion

The findings reveal that learner-to-instructor interaction has an influence on making learning French online to be learner-centred. Students sought a teaching style that involves their participation. This is supported by Sukimin et al (2021) where the findings revealed that students preferred a teaching style that allows students' involvement. Taib et al (2021) also found that learners feel a sense of belonging when participating in online class activities. As for learner-to-learner engagement, the findings revealed that peer support motivates learners when learning French online. On top of that, students prefer to be in a group with their chosen peers. As shown by Luan et al (2020) findings, a significant positive relationship was observed between learners' perceived peer support and their behavioral engagement.

Students with higher perceptions of peer support generally would exhibit better engagement. Lastly, to make learning French online knowledge-centred, the students need to get an overview of the content before the lesson. The study by Pham and Nguyen (2021) focused on the influence of interactions, internet self-efficacy and self-regulation on students' satisfaction. Based on the findings, learner-content interaction was found to be the strongest predictor of students' satisfaction.

Pedagogical Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

By knowing the learners' perception of the three different types of interaction within the lenses of online learning, educators can construct more effective learning activities to engage learners in French online classrooms. Future research should look at the effectiveness of learning design and learning activities in impacting learners' satisfaction and performance.

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