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A reappraisal of motivation, disengagement and language learning strategies amongst undergraduate students of French as a foreign language

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ABSTRACT

French has always been a minor discipline at universities in South Africa, despite its enormous socio-economic and professional potential on the African continent and in the Francophone world more generally. One of the main reasons for this is that few learners continue past the A1 (beginner) level, which may be attributed to low levels of motivation. This article explores the factors which impact student motivation and throughput in French undergraduate language courses at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa. The study, based on a master's research project, was conducted between 2021 and 2023 and included questionnaires and interviews to evaluate students' self-efficacy beliefs, motivations, levels of engagement and use of language learning strategies and the extent to which this impacted the continuation of their studies. The results showed that while both learning strategies and self-efficacy beliefs were present, these were not sufficient determinants for students to continue their language learning journey beyond the beginner level. The findings open a discussion on how to foster resilience in language learning at university level. More generally, they shed light on the limitations of instrumental motivation and a purely utilitarian approach to the teaching and learning of languages.

Keywords: Student motivation; language learning strategies; French as a foreign language; self-efficacy beliefs

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1. Introduction

High attrition rates at tertiary institutions of learning in South Africa have long been a subject of concern and debate. This phenomenon has been attributed to, *inter alia*, the cost of tertiary education in the context of extreme socio-economic inequality, challenges faced by first generation students who lack familial support as well as knowledge and guidance concerning course programmes and potential career choices, and general academic unpreparedness (Moodley & Singh, 2015; Moosa & Aloka, 2023). The issue of student retention in foreign (i.e. non-local) language departments is particularly fraught: as minor disciplines with low student numbers their existence is precarious and often perceived as being under threat. While this situation is not unique to South Africa (Davies, 2015; Bouche & Reisinger, 2021), it is further complexified by the nature of language learning which carries inherent challenges, not least that learning a non-local language offers few, if any, immersive opportunities. It might thus be unsurprising that many learners – whether at tertiary institutions or private language schools – do not continue beyond the A1 (beginner) level (Matsumoto & Obana, 2001; Richards 2008). Understanding students' initial motivations to study a foreign language and continue beyond the A1 level, as well as the challenges they experience, is a necessary starting point to untangling the reasons behind disengagement and high drop-out rates. Conversely, it seems essential to identify the factors which underlie student resilience and successful learning.

To this end, a study involving students of French at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) was undertaken between 2021 and 2023 as part of a Masters research project. The main objectives of the study were to identify the source(s) of disengagement and perceived low motivation levels exhibited by students at the first, second- and third-year levels of study. Data from the student sample – collected in the form of questionnaires and interviews – was analysed and contrasted with academics' perceptions of the same challenges. The study drew from the field of motivation theory, in particular Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory (SDT) (2001) and Oxford's language learning strategies (1989). The main claims informing the research project relate to the role of self-efficacy beliefs in learning, which concern learners' beliefs about their own abilities, that is, their capacity to learn and their agency in the learning process in general (Bandura, 1990). Indeed, self-efficacy beliefs are seen to be the drivers of active self-regulation, intrinsic motivation and the development of learning strategies (Bandura, 2009). The focus on language learning strategies attempted to account for the challenges related to foreign language learning. This orientation affirms that language learning strategies directly impact learners' self-efficacy beliefs which in turn are considered as fundamental to positive learning outcomes (Graham, 2004).

In the first part of the article, we provide an overview of the crisis in modern languages, internationally and in the South African context, and consider the relationship between low student throughput, motivation, language learning strategies, and self-efficacy. In the second

part of the article, we present the study involving students at Wits and analyse the research findings. Finally, the themes emerging from these findings, emanating from the interviews are discussed.

1.1 The crisis in modern languages

The so-called "crisis" in modern languages is both a global and local phenomenon associated with declining interest in language studies and student numbers. The issue, attributed in large part to globalisation and the status of English as the dominant international language, has been widely documented in the United Kingdom and the United States (Davies, 2015; Bouche & Reisinger, 2021), but is prevalent in non-Anglophone countries as well[1]. This trend is characterised by a perception of the lack of utility in learning foreign languages (Graham, 2004).

In South Africa, the crisis in modern languages is linked to the country's socio-political transformation, which, at the institutional level, has understandably shifted focus to the development and teaching of local, previously marginalised languages (Khumalo, cited in Greenleaf Walker, 2022; Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020). To quote Virga (2018, p. 469) on Italian studies in South Africa:

> The Italian language not only has to "compete" with several other languages, but it is also seen as a Eurocentric language, and therefore studying and promoting it seems to run contrary to the decolonisation and africanisation agenda that is increasingly being pushed within the country.

Since the 1990s, Italian Studies departments have closed at University of the Free State, Stellenbosch, and Rhodes Universities and more recently at the University of South Africa (UNISA) (Virga, 2018). Similarly, German, Russian and Spanish were phased out and discontinued at UNISA in 2016 (Annas, 2016). Along with declining numbers, the existence of French departments has also become precarious: French at the Howard college (Durban) campus of the University of KwaZulu Natal (UKZN) was briefly scaled down in 2022 and in the same year, the department of French Studies at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) was phased out and subsequently closed in 2023.

At the University of the Witwatersrand, where the current study was conducted, the introduction of a language policy to promote local languages includes a language requirement where first-year students not fluent in an African language are required to take two credit-bearing modules, two semester-long courses, of either Sesotho or isiZulu at the first year level

[1] For example, French and German have lost their influence in favour of English in Turkey (Arslan, 2021) and French has lost prestige in Estonia (Meristo, 2022).

(University of the Witwatersrand, 2023). The knock-on effect of this has been a drop in student enrolments in the Department of Modern Languages as indicated in the table below. The table shows that student enrolments for Modern languages (French, German, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish) have approximately halved over the period of 2013-2022, with the total intake of 148 in 2022, compared to an intake of 330 in 2013.

Table 1: Undergraduate student registrations in the Department of Modern Languages, Semester 1, 2013-2022

Year	Total UG (SEM1)	Total First Year (SEM1)	Total Second Year (SEM1)	Total Third Year (SEM1)
2013	330	275	40	15
2014	302	236	50	16
2015	365	289	56	20
2016	402	307	63	32
2017	352	253	69	30
2018	255	178	53	24
2019	212	130	52	30
2020	176	116	40	20
2021	169	120	32	17
2022	148	96	30	22

The table above illustrates not only the drop in initial undergraduate registrations, but also the low continuation rates from the first year to the second and third years of study, which has remained a constant trend throughout the years. As alluded to in the introduction, this seems to be a characteristic of language learning trajectories in general. In this regard, in addition to the phenomenon of "natural attrition" (*inter alia*, students who take the language for one year only, academic unpreparedness), low continuation rates point strongly to the complexities of language learning which present unique affective, cognitive and motivational challenges (Arnold, 2011; Pellegrino, 2020; Pulido, 2022).

1.2 The limits of motivation and language learning

Motivation in language learning has typically been classified as extrinsic, – relating to external consequences or reward systems, or intrinsic, – relating to the inherent satisfaction brought about by the activity, or instrumental, – associated with the practical or pragmatic reasons for pursuing the study of a language (Meristo, 2022; Ryan & Deci, 2000). These motivations may overlap, especially, for example, in the academic context where high marks are a driver of motivation, where the extrinsic motivation of high achievement may overlap with intrinsic or

instrumental goals. In spite of these multiple sources of motivation, there has been continued focus on the instrumental value of learning languages in the way they are marketed[2]. French holds appeal as an international language which is seen as advantageous to future career prospects. In South Africa, it also holds status as an African language and ideologically draws from the concept of *Francophonie*, a model of post-colonial cultural diversity *par excellence* (Gandolfi, *et al.*, 2021; Horne, 2015). In response to the crisis in Modern Languages, as discussed in 1.1., attempts have been made to render the discipline more instrumental in orientation. In the United States, the move towards French for Professional Purposes (FPP) means that the language is offered increasingly as a "service course" for International Relations, Business and Law (Bouche & Reisinger, 2021). In South Africa, Burger (2016) links the need for the study of French to the country's diplomatic objectives in Africa and Europe. French for Specific Purposes aims to be more responsive to local needs, as evidenced in the development of programs at the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (Morake, 2010) or as part of postgraduate offerings at the University of the Witwatersrand (https://www.wits.ac.za/course-finder/postgraduate/humanities/bahons-french-and-francophone-studies/#anchor3). These offerings, while valuable, remain narrow in focus and belie the hundreds of hours of learning and extensive engagement required to reach this level.

More than other academic disciplines, language learning requires active engagement, autonomy, self-regulation and sustained motivation on the part of the learner. Self-regulated learning, essential to flourishing in the academic context, requires learners to expect to succeed, to perceive value in the learning tasks and to have a positive affective response to tasks (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990). Additionally, language learning is social in nature, requiring interaction with others that leads to feelings of vulnerability (Arnold, 2011).

Language acquisition relies heavily on language processing and retrieval (Pulido, 2022), which is challenging in real-time interaction. This speaks to the distinction between declarative knowledge – knowledge *about* the language –, and procedural knowledge – *how* to use the language. This involves memorising vocabulary, grammar, rules of morpho-syntax *and* learning how to use these functionally (Pellegrino, 2020). It is estimated that the attainment of functional communicative competence at the B1-B2 level, where the speaker is seen as an independent user of the language (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, 2020), requires approximately 700 hours of practice (U.S. Department of Service: Foreign

[2] On the Wits website, the Department of Modern languages refer to the international status of their languages as a form of linguistic and social capital and highlight career paths the languages provide access to . Cultural capital is also highlighted as advantageous (https://www.wits.ac.za/sllm/french/; https://www.wits.ac.za/sllm/german/; https: //www.wits.ac.za/sllm/spanish-/).
On Alliance Française and French government websites similar claims are made (https://pta.alliance.org.za/2020/02/13/why-learn-french/; https://nz.ambafrance.org/17-bonnes-raisons-d-apprendre-le)

Service Institute, *s.a.*). This exceeds the number of teaching hours assigned to the undergraduate Modern Languages programmes at the University of the Witwatersrand, where the teaching hours at undergraduate level totals 680 hours of Communicative Language teaching, which includes both acquiring the formal properties/grammar of the language (procedural knowledge) and practice (declarative knowledge). This distinction is apparent in the second year of study, which includes students who have completed French for Matric and students who have completed one year of French only. Students who have taken French at high school have had prolonged exposure to the language and communicate in the target language with significantly more ease and confidence compared to their counterparts, in spite of taking extra bridging classes. Learning a language therefore requires immense initial and continued motivation to persevere past the beginning phases, where the returns are not immediately apparent.

Over and above the time-intensive nature of language acquisition, the affective aspect is an important consideration. Whether in guided communicative situations or spontaneous ones, oral interaction places a high affective burden on the speaker. Studies in the field of Neurology show that affect has an impact on cognition (Arnold, 2011) demonstrating the link between the 'academic' and the 'emotional' aspects of learning, as well as the value of prioritising metacognition and self-regulation for academic success. In language learning, the affective component is even more pronounced because one's ability to express oneself competently is closely linked with self-confidence (*ibid*.). Therefore, a low stress environment where students are given opportunities to express themselves and a chance to develop their autonomy, and where learning is seen "holistically" as a "personally meaningful experience" is considered as favourable to language learning (Arnold, 2011, p. 2).

Given the high demands placed on students for an uncertain payoff which is not immediately visible (in terms of academic results and performance), it is unsurprising that instrumental or extrinsic sources of motivation do not suffice for students to continue through to the second year. This is where the importance of self-efficacy, learning strategies and intrinsic motivation come into play. As Arnold (2011) writes, the success expectancy component and developing concrete skills go hand in hand; they mutually support one another. As learners grow in communicative competence, they also grow in the belief that they are able to better master the language and vice versa.

1.3 Learning strategies and self-efficacy

Learning strategies and self-efficacy beliefs have been identified as factors which support student success and intrinsic motivation. Strategic learning is essential as it accelerates language learning progress (Harris, 2001). University preparedness and self-efficacy are closely linked. University preparedness has been loosely defined as the range of skills (mathematical, technological, and literacy-related) *and* strategies (metacognitive, cognitive

and socio-affective) that should be developed by the time a learner enters university (Conley & French, 2014; Monnapula-Mapesela, 2015). Learning strategies are far-reaching and may be grouped as metacognitive (e.g. time management and goal setting); cognitive (e.g. memorisation techniques and research skills); and socio-affective (e.g. help-seeking and autoregulatory behaviours such as keeping a journal or positive self-talk) (Pintrich *et al*., 1991).

Language learning strategies can be categorised in a similar manner. According to Oxford (1989), the theorist behind the creation of the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), language learning strategies may be direct or indirect. Direct strategies may include memorisation (repetition, flashcards), cognitive (seeking out opportunities to practise the target language), and compensatory (inferring meaning from contextual cues, whether in real communicative contexts or reading tasks). Indirect strategies may be metacognitive (e.g. assessing the language learning progress, adapting strategies), affective (e.g. reflecting on one's experience of language learning, attempting to speak despite fear of making language errors), and social (e.g. help-seeking) (Oxford, 1989). From the examples given above, it is clear that language learning strategies are specifically tied to difficulties encountered in language learning and go beyond general strategies and university preparedness. The types of strategies that learners use and their evaluation of the effectiveness of these strategies also seem to be indicative of the level of success they will have in language learning (Teng, 2023). In the South African university context, strategic learning is especially relevant in the first year of study, which is a decisive year for students in terms of continuing or not with studying the language.

Self-efficacy relates to learners' perceptions of their performance and capabilities in these areas. It is the sense of confidence that a learner has in his own knowledge and skills, and his ability to acquire further knowledge and skills (Conley & French, 2014). It follows then, that self-efficacy beliefs are bolstered by verified competence in certain skills and strategies, and that students' academic ability (competence) and their perceptions of that ability (confidence) go hand in hand (Conley & French, 2014). High self-efficacy, resulting from successful learning attempts, drives learners to surpass their zones of proximal development (Renaud *et al*., 2016), by constantly facing and overcoming challenges. The inverse also applies: low self-efficacy beliefs have been linked to high dropout rates, as demonstrated in a study carried out in KwaZulu Natal (Moodley & Singh, 2015). When students lack confidence in their ability to overcome academic challenges, they may perceive their efforts as unproductive as their affect is diminished, therefore lowering motivation, and leading to withdrawal from or discontinuation of their studies. Self-efficacy is also a key component in supporting intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000), as those who believe that they are able to accomplish a task are more likely to work towards it (Barbeau *et al*., 1997). Broadly speaking, both competence and confidence are interrelated and necessary to academic success and all the more so in language learning which presents unique cognitive and affective challenges as mentioned above. Furthermore, strategy use and language proficiency seem to be strongly linked; however, the "direction of causality" in this relationship has not been clearly established (Teng, 2023, p. 162).

It is clear, then, that these concrete "strategies" and "techniques" are tied to seemingly abstract emotional responses to learning – affect and motivation. In this regard, the concept of autoregulation is essential to understanding student motivation and its impact on performance. Autoregulation, or self-regulation, is part of student "ownership" of learning (Conley & French, 2014, p. 1018). It refers to the ability to self-monitor and adjust one's own behaviour, focus, and strategies in order to be more effective in the learning environment. Autoregulation bridges the gap between students' self-evaluations of their academic 'performances' and continued concrete efforts to learn. The concepts of autonomy, autoregulation, motivation, and, more generally, student preparedness (Bandura, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Moosa & Aloka, 2023) are central to student success and have been widely explored in recent years. Self-regulated learners are "metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviourally active participants in their own learning" (Zimmerman, 1990, p. 4). Self-regulation and student ownership are particularly important for success in higher learning institutions because of the level of autonomy required from students (Conley & French, 2014). Even more so, then, in language learning at higher learning institutions for the same reason, and furthermore owing to the extreme time constraints placed on students to progress in their development of communicative competence.

Self-Determination Theory refers to the external conditions which enhance the internalisation of extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and has been applied extensively to the study of motivation in language learning (McEown, & Oga-Baldwin, 2019). Based on the motivational theory of Ryan and Deci (2000) and the strategy theory, the 2021-3 study focused on the measurement of language learning strategies (which can be explicitly taught) and self-efficacy (an individual motivational factor). These concepts were hypothesised as possible predictors of student retention in their capacity to increase motivation to continue studying French.

2. Aims and methodology of the study

The aim of the study, as discussed above, was to determine the sources of disengagement and perceived low motivation levels exhibited by students. In the research design, reasons hypothesised for causes of disengagement and discontinuation were 1) an absence/ineffective use of learning strategies and 2) low self- efficacy beliefs on the part of undergraduate students learning French at the University of the Witwatersrand. Conversely, the study sought to investigate what kinds of motivation were drivers of student engagement and by extension, student retention at undergraduate level. A mixed methods approach was adopted, using quantitative and qualitative data acquired from questionnaires and interviews with undergraduate students at first-, second- and third-year level as well as with academic staff. The data was analysed quantitatively and qualitatively and compared to identify common and differing perceptions around motivation, self-efficacy beliefs and language learning strategies.

2.1 Data collection

A mixed methods approach was used to investigate the problem. Surveys were used to quantitatively measure levels of strategy use and of self-efficacy beliefs among students at each level of study. The survey instruments used for this study were the SILL (Oxford, 1989), to determine which language learning strategies were used by students, and two scales (perceptions of autonomy and control and self-efficacy) from the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) (Pintrich *et al.*, 1991). Both surveys are auto-assessment surveys and use a Likert scale measurement (see annexure 1). In addition to these scales, a third scale comprising 16 strategy statements to measure the use of Digital Strategies was added by the researcher in an effort to update the SILL to include modern language learning habits for 21st century students (Lebrun & Lacelle, 2014). Finally, questionnaires also assessed qualitative data, such as reasons and intent to continue (or not) with French studies, and use of applications and online tools.

The quantitative data and instruments were analysed for reliability, validity, and normal distribution. For the entire population, Cronbach's alpha for the SILL overall was calculated at (α= .908), and for the Digital Strategies scale overall (α= .736), both acceptable levels of reliability. The subscales for compensation strategies (SILL) and automatic translation (Digital strategies) were below acceptable levels of reliability (α<.5) meaning that definite conclusions cannot be drawn from comparing these subscales or in correlation analyses between them and other subscales and were therefore not performed. For the latter (automatic translation), the reasons are explained below (3.1.3).

Semi-structured interviews with both students and lecturers qualitatively complemented this data by providing more detail of their experiences. This data included the students' experience of learning the language at university, and the lecturers' perspectives on observed student behaviour regarding motivation and strategy use. The interviews with students provide individual context and elaborate on the reasoning behind their survey responses for their most and least used strategies and motivations according to the questionnaire. The interviews followed the order of the questionnaire as has been done by Amerstorfer (2018) with the SILL. For example, if a student responded with a 1 or a 5 to a certain strategy item, in the interview he or she was given an opportunity to explain further why this was one of his or her least or most used strategies. In this way, the qualitative data complemented and cross-referenced the quantitative data (Amerstorfer, 2018; Laflamme, 2007). Academics were questioned about the relevance of the research question itself, in other words, whether or not the perceived problem of disengagement and demotivation was truly present, as well as strategy use in classrooms, and their perceptions of students' self-efficacy beliefs. Transcriptions were typed out manually by the researcher and then manually analysed according to theme. These themes included those hypothesised, such as self-efficacy, autonomy, and strategy use (used to compliment the quantitative analyses) as well as others which arose such as, socio-economic difficulties and lack of academic orientation information provided at the moment of subject choice (detailed in

the dissertation's discussion). The same themes, as well as others identified in the data, are discussed in this paper.

2.2 Participants and ethics

Students of French at Wits at all levels of study were invited to participate in surveys and interviews; however, only undergraduate level students responded. Thirty-five students participated in the study, with 31 questionnaires being acceptable (no errors in the filling in of the questionnaires – all questions were responded to – and students were over 18, the minimum age of consent). There were 16 participants in first year, 10 in second year, and 5 in third year. All students were between 18 and 24 years old. Two students from each year of study were interviewed using the principle of voluntary participation. The questionnaire invited students to consent to interviews; those who did consent were contacted, and the first two students at each level who responded to the invitation were then interviewed. All four lecturers who lectured in the French and Francophone Studies department in 2021 were interviewed.

The surveys and interviews conducted with students were conducted in English and the interviews with lecturers were conducted in French. An ethics clearance was obtained from the university for the study in September 2021 (H21/08/14). At the instruction of the committee, an anonymised invitation was initially sent out via a central administrator at the university. Given the very small target population and the small likelihood of them reading the bulk email, additional permission was acquired from the committee to briefly present the project to students directly. All those invited to participate in the study were assured that participation was optional and declining to do so would have no impact on their studies. Participants were given a participant information sheet and consent form, detailing how the data they provided would be used in the research project and for further studies. All participants were assured that their participation would remain confidential when the data was published. As the French department at the university is relatively small, participants were made aware that inferences may be made of their identities, but every effort was made to make these confidential. For example, all participants were referred to with the masculine pronoun in the study to avoid the risk of being identified and personal details were censored from the published transcripts in the annexe.

3. Data analysis and findings

3.1 Student questionnaires

The questionnaire on strategy use consisted of qualitative and quantitative elements. The quantitative element comprised eleven different sections, called subscales – lists of statements, called items, comprising the same component for analysis –, each regarding a category of strategy use or learning behaviour as well as self-efficacy and autonomy beliefs. For example, the "social strategies" scale is comprised of six items, such as practising with other students

and help-seeking, which all reflect the component "social strategies" as they each measure strategic interaction. Among these subscales were the six strategy types included in the SILL, three subscales for digital strategy use elaborated by the researcher and described below, as well as the "autonomy and control" and "self-efficacy" subscales included in the MSLQ. Table 2, below, represents strategy use. Student responses to each strategy statement were self-reported and measured on a Likert scale from 1 (Never or almost never used) to 5 (Always or almost always used), and to the Expectancy scale of the MSLQ on a Likert scale from 1 to 7 (Not at all to Always true of me). The overall means of all participants to the SILL overall, each strategy, the expectancy scale and each item were calculated using SPSS software and these means were compared and tabulated, offering a picture of most and least used strategies of the population sample following the categorisation of Oxford cited in Amerstorfer (2018, p, 501), with the addition of the success expectancy data from the MSLQ. Overall means for the entire population sample are represented to avoid improper comparisons between 1st, 2nd, and 3rd year owing to their different group sizes. This should be kept in mind when looking at data between years.

The subscales in the SILL include direct (memorisation, cognitive, and compensation) strategies, and indirect (metacognitive, affective, and social) strategies discussed in 1.3. Memorisation strategies include using rhymes, picture associations, application of new words in speech, acting out the words, or remembering the words' physical placement (Oxford, 1989). Cognitive strategies include repetition – one may argue that this strategy should be classified as a memorisation strategy rather than a cognitive strategy –, such as practising the sounds of the language, imitating native speakers, and engaging with the language through media *etc.* (Oxford, 1989). Compensation strategies include strategies that compensate for language gaps including using gestures, inventing words, and paraphrasing (Oxford, 1989). These strategies are all 'direct' as they deal with direct engagement with the language itself.

In terms of indirect strategies, metacognitive strategies include learning from one's language mistakes, focused attention, and planning for learning, among others (Oxford, 1989). Affective strategies include self-calming strategies when the language learner is anxious or afraid to use the target language, recording the language learning process, and giving oneself rewards for learning (Oxford, 1989). Finally, social strategies include practising the target language with other students, asking questions, and learning about the target language's culture (Oxford, 1989).

The Digital Strategies scale investigates the subscales of media use, including accessing videos or podcasts online; cognitive strategies which use digital tools such as online games for improving one's grammar; and automatic translation and online vocabulary searches, such as using online dictionaries, subtitles when watching French media, and translators to translate short phrases or long passages , and using online context dictionaries (parallel corpus translations).

Table 2: Overview of strategy use by undergraduate students at the University of the Witwatersrand

Level of strategy use		Likert scale means	Type of strategy (mean Likert response for the entire population)
High	Always or almost always used	4.5 to 5.00	
	Usually used	3.5 to 4.4	Metacognitive strategies (3.60) Digital strategies: automatic translation (3.56)
Medium	Sometimes used	2.5 to 3.4	Social strategies (3.41) Compensation strategies (3.10) Cognitive strategies (3.06) Memorisation strategies (2.84) Digital strategies: cognitive strategies (2.68) Digital strategies: media (2.55) Affective strategies (2.42)
Low	Usually not used	1.5 to 2.4	
	Never or almost never used	1.0 to 1.4	

3.1.1 Medium to high strategy use in general domains

As is evident from the table above, the entire student sample (1st, 2nd, and 3rd year) scored a mean strategy use of 3.07 for SILL, which is "medium" level of strategy use according to Oxford's (1989) SILL categorisation (see Amerstorfer, 2018). In addition, the mean range of overall student responses for each scale fell between the medium to high (2.5 – 4.4) range (sometimes used and usually used). At first glance, this may seem counterintuitive to the working hypothesis of the study, that is, that a lack of strategy use leads to student disengagement. However, a closer analysis of findings reveals that the kinds of strategies used, and their frequency are not always optimal and sometimes counterproductive at particular language levels and with particular communicative goals in mind.

For example, the least frequently used SILL strategies were memorisation and affective strategies, both essential for beginner learners. Memorisation strategies are those that learners use most in the initial phases of learning a foreign language, as these strategies assist learners to "store and retrieve information" (Wang, 2023, p. 2). Starting from a complete beginner level, foreign language learners need to build a base of knowledge, in terms of vocabulary and

grammar basics, to progress towards spontaneous communication (Pellegrino, 2020). Extensive memorisation reduces cognitive load on working memory (Teng, 2023), thereby improving learners' capacity for spontaneous communication. In addition, memorisation is integral to the language learning process in an environment where authentic language exposure is rare (Wang, 2023). It is clear, then, that memorisation strategies are essential for beginner learners. For this reason, one might expect the first year mean in this category to be higher than that of the group mean; however, for first years alone, it was lower (2.7). Teng (2023) suggests that a lack of memorisation strategy use could be caused by low interest. This is explored in the lecturer interviews.

Affect, a learner's emotional response to the subject matter, significantly influences motivation and confidence to communicate spontaneously when faced with feelings of anxiety (Teng, 2023), and strategies assist with interaction and participation despite low levels of communicative proficiency (Arnold, 2011). At the very early stages of learning French, learners do not have the communicative competence to be able to effectively express their ideas beyond concrete, everyday topics such as personal information, directions, and requests. For this reason, beginner learners need affective strategies to overcome their "internal barrier", lower feelings of anxiousness, remain optimistic, and increase motivation (Teng, 2023, p.152). The first year mean response for affective strategies was (2.2), which can be considered as "low" strategy use, according to the categorisation above, pointing to a potential 'unpreparedness' in first year French language learning students to face the affective challenge of learning a foreign language.

The most frequently used SILL strategy subscales were metacognitive and social. One reason for this may be the transferability of these skills between subjects; in other words, these are general academic skills and strategies (such as goal setting and help-seeking) that students have developed over time. While metacognitive and social strategies are useful and necessary, they do not deal specifically with language learning. This again points to a possible need for learners to be trained in strategies specific to language learning. As Teng (2023, p.148) mentions, awareness of specific language learning strategies "that fit the L2 task at hand" make students more "active" and "purposeful" in their language learning. In addition, these strategies increase students' confidence and effectiveness (*ibid*.). Indeed, while general strategies may be of academic significance, they do not deal with the specific issues of language learning, such as acquiring vocabulary, grammar, direct versus indirect translations and other such problems.

On the other hand, the self-reported high use of metacognitive strategies also seems to point to a disconnect between student behaviour and self-reflection, as discussed in the interviews with lecturers and with the students themselves. In other words, students may perceive their strategy use to be more developed than it really is. Another factor that may influence learners' self-evaluations is levels of learning experience and self-reflection, as more experienced learners

may be more likely to have more accurate self-reflections about skills developed over time as a student (Teng, 2023).

3.1.2 The emergence and prevalence of digital strategies

The Digital Strategy Scale, including three categories: automatic translation, media use, and cognitive strategies using digital tools was added as a means to measure the impact of digitalisation on patterns of learning (see Lebrun & Lacelle, 2014), ways of learning that have evolved since the conceptualisation of the SILL in 1989. Of particular interest were the ways in which automatic translation and social media modified and/or transformed learning behaviour. This subscale, as it had not been peer-reviewed, was not included in mean calculations for *overall* strategy use (3.07, mentioned above in 3.1.1.) This mean was used in correlation calculations between self-efficacy and strategy-use / declaration of intent to continue and strategy-use. However, each digital strategy subscale's mean use is included in Table 2 above. As expected in the conceptualisation phase of the digital strategies scale, automatic translation was one of the most frequently used strategies with a mean use of 3.56 on the 5-point Likert scale. In addition, the most frequently used strategy by students was #55. "*I use online translators to look up short phrases from English to French*" with a mean use of 4.39.

As mentioned in 2.1, the reliability of this subscale was below acceptable standards. It is evident that the subscale in its entirety may be misleading in its representation of students' use of automatic translation (the combination of online dictionary use, subtitles, context dictionaries – parallel corpus translation –, and online translation platforms – which participants could have taken to mean anything from Google Translate, to DeepL to parallel corpus translation tools online). While this may be so, two factors are of interest. Firstly, that strategy #55 is the most used by students indicates a reliance on online translation for short phrases. Furthermore, during the interviews most learners indicated some level of reliance on Google Translate to help them with their studies. The use of automatic translation, particularly habitual use, seems to have a negative impact on students' cognitive and memorisation strategy use. For example, in the interviews, participants in all years admitted to automatically resorting to online tools for translations, with differing levels of self-reflection. This is confirmed in the research on the interaction between digital tools and memory; when digital tools are used as an external memory aid it gives users false impressions of having a better memory than they actually do (Călinescu, 2024). As alluded to above, Teng (2023) and Wang (2023) defend memorisation strategies as crucial in enhancing language learners' capacities for spontaneous communication by building a knowledge base of vocabulary and grammar, thereby reducing learners' cognitive load neurologically (instead of the digital tool doing so (Călinescu, 2024)). It appears that automatic translation tools give learners the false impression of a reduced cognitive load as information storage and retrieval is outsourced to the digital tool rather than

this taking place cognitively. During the student and lecturer interviews alike, the habitual use of automatic translation was unanimously foregrounded. This is further discussed below.

In addition to the self-reporting strategy-use scales, the digital strategy section in the questionnaires included open-ended questions concerning learning applications and social media engagement with Francophone content. In the first year, learners mostly used Duolingo and Babbel, as well two who used memorisation applications, such as Memrise and Study Smart In the second year, the applications cited were the most varied. Learners used Duolingo, language exchange sites, memorisation applications, and interestingly, their application use also showed engagement with Francophone culture and media with some learners using YouTube, podcasts, and TV5 Monde to access French language material. In the third year, four of the five students surveyed used Instagram to access authentic Francophone content and lessons, and one student used WhatsApp to connect with Francophone friends. Learners in second and third year showed more engagement with social media and demonstrated more authentic language use through applications such as X, Snapchat, and WhatsApp.

3.1.3 Self-efficacy beliefs

The table below represents the mean student responses from the surveys for the expectations of success (perceptions of autonomy and control and self-efficacy) scale used from the MSLQ. These subscales used a Likert scale measurement of 1-7.

Table 3: Self-efficacy beliefs of undergraduate students of French at the University of the Witwatersrand

Level of self-efficacy	Level of agreement with scale	Likert response (1-7)	Subscale (mean Likert response for the entire population)
High	Always true for me	6.5 to 7.0	
	Almost always true for me	5.5 to 6.4	Perceptions of autonomy and control (6.01)
	Somewhat true for me	4.5 to 5.4	Feelings of self-efficacy (5.07)
Medium	Neutral	3.5 to 4.4	
Low	Somewhat untrue for me	2.5 to 3.4	
	Mostly untrue for me	1.5 to 2.4	
	Not at all true for me	1.0 to 1.4	

The above results were surprising given the initial hypotheses about students' possible lack of autonomy, engagement, motivation, strategy use, and self-efficacy beliefs, which are supported in the interviews with academics. In fact, the means for both scales were in the high range, demonstrating that none of the students had low perceptions of autonomy and control and/or

self-efficacy as initially believed. As autonomy and control refer to learners' awareness of their responsibility in learning – the correlation between effort and success – it is possible that while learners understand increased effort would lead to increased learning, this is simply a theoretical understanding that does not necessarily lead to increased effort. Likewise, learners' belief in their capacity to understand, learn, and succeed academically (self-efficacy) may not necessarily lead to their expending the effort required to make these actions a reality. For these reasons, the interviews with students and academics provided a clearer, if more complex picture of student perceptions of learning and lecturers' observations of student behaviour.

3.2 Student and lecturer interviews

In this section, we discuss the themes which emerged from the student and lecturer interviews. The student interviews addressed students' motivations for studying French, students' use of strategies and more generally, their attitudes towards their studies in French. The interviews with lecturers similarly addressed student motivation and engagement, and lecturers' positions on strategy-use in the French language classroom. The choice to combine the discussion of common themes emanating from the interviews in this paper allowed for a comparison between student and lecturer perceptions around the questions of motivation, strategy use and self-efficacy beliefs. In the original research, these discussions were separate and thus dealt with different themes as raised by lecturers and students separately.

3.2.1 Theme 1: counter-productive strategy use

As stated above, the digital learning section of the surveys highlighted a propensity for learners to mechanically gravitate towards automatic translation in lieu of parallel corpus dictionaries as a strategy for translating short phrases. This is often done as a quick-fix solution to vocabulary or grammar gaps. Interestingly, the habitual use of automatic translation was noted as problematic by both students and lecturers during the interview phase. Lecturers #1 and #2 mentioned the use of automatic translation as a form of 'cheating' which masks students' true abilities and is detrimental to the act of learning itself – particularly when these tools are used without reflection.

While student #2.2. mentioned using a parallel corpus dictionary, and student #3.1. mentioned using Google Translate as a verification method to check sentences he had already formulated, other students interviewed mentioned Google Translate as a 'go-to' resource. They noted a desire to find more appropriate and thought-engaging tools for vocabulary searches. Student #1.2. mentioned using Google Translate as an initial point of access for comprehension, but wanting to find a better solution given the lack of context in the 'direct translation' it provides. Student #2.2., while highly motivated and a high strategy user, admitted to an 'unthinking' recourse to Google Translate.

> [W]e've been encouraged not to use Google translate from high school. Ugh, I'm not going to lie, I still use that a lot, especially just for the short little words, but um, I've started using online translators like you know, official dictionaries online, because it helps you think more.

Student #3.2. was extraordinarily forthright in the interview. His comments on the use of Google Translate as a strategy expose the ease with which automatic translation can be used in the 21st Century, confirming lecturers' suspicions.

> If I receive an email [...] in French, I will quickly just put it on Google translate without even attempting to read it. I'll… that's a bad habit. I need to stop doing that.

While conscious of the detrimental impact on his French learning, the student habitually chooses the faster – and seemingly more accurate – solution to reading comprehension. Later in the interview, he reflected:

> [Language learning strategies help] you more be independent and write the correct stuff and not rely on stupid apps like Google translate 'cause now you're not confident in your own abilities [...].

The latter comment indicates that for the student, reliance on automatic translation is undesirable and may stem from a lack of self-efficacy, which he believed would be improved through explicit strategy instruction. His lack of self-efficacy was confirmed through lower-than-average scores for the expectations of success scale in the survey.

3.2.2 Theme 2: the disconnect between stated motivation and real engagement

A major theme to emerge from the interviews was the disconnect between students' stated motivation and their actual levels of engagement towards their studies. This inconsistency was particularly evident at the first-year level of study. For example, student #1.1 indicated that he was highly motivated and interested in the subject, but also admitted:

> I spend more time with my main subject content [...] than I do with French [...]. There'sbarely an occasion where I spend time with French content outside of the French classroom.

This candid comment demonstrates that there is little correlation between the effort required to achieve fluency – a goal he stated in the interview – and his actual practices. Similarly, student #1.2. stated that he was highly motivated and had instrumental (career) goals in learning French, yet that if his marks were not high, would not continue to second-year level.

All four lecturers interviewed agreed that absenteeism and low participation in the classroom were major challenges at first year level. While a variety of reasons were given to explain this, such as, *inter alia*, heavy academic load, changes to learning behaviours after the Covid-19

crisis and financial instability, a significant factor that emerged across the board was a lack of understanding, on the part of students, of the time and effort required in achieving communicative competence. This is highlighted by seemingly ambitious, yet superficial initial motivations. As stated by lecturer #1:

> "I think that French is a language with quite a high status in terms of its prestige and that attracts students [...]. They try the language out, experiment, they want to try something new, something different, and French is also really foreign to us South Africans.[3]

Lecturer #3 echoed this comment, explaining that motivations are initially very high in the first year and drop quickly as students encounter challenges in their language learning. For many students, first year is just about "trying out" the language, but it doesn't necessarily "stick".

> They don't want to embarrass themselves, or they don't know how [to approach learning]. I think there's also an issue of confidence as well, in what they're able to accomplish, in their relationships with teachers, with the administration, with the institution as a whole[4].

3.2.3 Theme 3: unrealistic learning expectations and habits leading to disengagement

As highlighted by lecturer #1 and lecturer #2, students' lack of engagement may be attributed to passive learning styles and a lack of familiarity with active, communicative pedagogies. This receptive posture, most likely inculcated during their school career, might well be the cause of superficial use of learning strategies.

In particular, students seem to encounter affective challenges in relation to the performative aspects of language learning. This is partially related to unrealistic learning expectations as evidenced by student #1.2. who struggled with the idea that when expressing himself he was less than "perfect":

> I start to get a little bit more nervous about making mistakes with the language, not getting it … perfect.

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[3] Translated from French by le Roux, T: *Je pense que le français est une langue avec un statut assez élevé au niveau de son prestige et que ça attire les étudiants. [...] Ils s'essayent à la langue, s'expérimentent, ils veulent découvre quelque chose de nouveau, quelque chose de différent, et puis ça c'est que c'est aussi que le français est vraiment une langue très étrangère pour nous les Sud-africains*.

[4] « *Ils veulent peut-être pas s'exposer ou ne savent pas aussi, je pense qu'il y a un problème de confiance peut-être hein dans ce qu'on est capable de faire, dans sa relation aussi avec les enseignants, avec l'administration, avec fin, l'institution en général »*.

Similarly, student #2.2. alluded to feeling very self-conscious when speaking the language in the classroom. These comments are supported by lecturers' insights. Lecturer #2 cited a lack of confidence, or a fear of "putting oneself forward", as one of the reasons students did not participate in discussions in class. Student #1.1. admitted to feeling overwhelmed by an array of new grammatical concepts and student #2.2. stated that he did not read in the target language outside of the course requirements, as it was simply too frustrating:

> [I]t's very frustrating when you read something you don't understand and um, it's something that I do want to change [...] because I also need to um, remember to always read on my level. Of course I want to read big authors, great French books, but I have to just take it down to my level but I'm planning on changing that. I hope I do pretty soon. [laughs].

These comments illuminate the disconnect between student goals and ambitions around language learning (the desire to read "big authors" and "great French books") on the one hand, and the inability to tolerate discomfort and frustration in the learning process on the other. Lecturer #2 expressed the emotional complexity linked to language learning and to approaching studies in general which foregrounds the issue of student unpreparedness:

3.2.4 "Mature learning" and intrinsic motivation

While the students interviewed at third year level had also encountered language learning challenges, they demonstrated more self-reflexivity in their approaches to learning, and a deep commitment to continue to progress in the language than the second- and first-year students interviewed. They had reconciled instrumental learning goals with intrinsic motivation, finding value and fulfilment in language learning itself. Their engagement with the language went beyond the minimum course requirements, taking every opportunity they could to speak the language, watch French media, and sit the DALF exams.

Student #3.1. demonstrated a self-reflexive and honest attitude with regards to his failures learning another language in comparison with French and made inferences about how this might relate to his peers:

> I think um, like, language is something— you can't go into a language for the sake of going into the language— it's something you want, you need to go into the language cause it's something you want to learn. So if a student comes to French like without, um, without having the motivation to learn about it or not wanting to do it, then they're not– they're likely not going to stay in that course for the next year [...] [W]hen I took Italian in first year, I wanted to do French, so I didn't really have the motivation compared to when I'm taking French and it reflected in my marks also.

While at the time of the survey, student #3.2 showed low confidence levels, he explained during the interview that he had been highly self-critical. As with student #3.1., this learner was able to reflect on his own learning practices and effectiveness, a metacognitive strategy. This student explained how strategies learned over time through social interaction and persevering through communication difficulties allowed him to progress; nevertheless, he lamented that this progress was insufficient. These students mature – self-reflexive, honest, and experienced – outlook to learning French was evidenced in strategy use that had been honed over time. This demonstrates the mutual interaction between the several factors discussed above: confidence increased as students became more experienced, competent, autonomous, and effective learners. Nevertheless, where competence was underappreciated and student confidence suffered, some learners persevered and one of the factors contributing to this perseverance might simply be experience with the language and having already overcome difficulties in learning.

4. Discussion

Several important findings emerged in this study of which we provide an overview in this section. Somewhat unexpectedly, the results demonstrated that students not only had a medium to high range for self-efficacy and strategy use, but they also intended to continue their studies. In other words, the students who chose to participate in the study self-reported that they were self-efficacious language learning strategy-users and that they would continue learning French beyond their year of study at the time. This led to a comparative study between student interviews and questionnaires and lecturer interviews, which raised questions about students' self-awareness and motivation versus their will (volition) to put these feelings into action in continuing their studies in French. Firstly, the medium to high strategy use, as recorded by the SILL inventory and relatively high self-efficacy beliefs, as recorded by the MSLQ expectations of success scale, were scrutinised in relation to their limitations as research instruments as well as in relation to the interviews. Metacognitive and social strategy use were found to be too general a domain to reflect the specific nature of language learning. Furthermore, fundamental strategies in the early phases of learning, such as memorisation, a predictor for long term language learning and success, tended to be underused. On the other hand, the overuse of automatic translation was shown to undermine the cognitive effort fundamental to constructing and integrating new language skills.

It is likely that the high responses regarding student motivation and self-efficacy beliefs were to some extent a result of self-deceptive enhancement, which refers to the unconscious tendency to self-overevaluation, and also to impression management, which refers to creating positive self-image for the benefit of the researcher. It is worth mentioning too that this may be a condition of a population sampling bias which resulted from voluntary participation. The researcher attempted to avoid this by presenting the research project to all students and making

participation simple; however, it is clear that when researching motivational deficits, 'motivated' students may be the only ones willing to participate in voluntary research.

The interviews revealed a more complex picture, where students struggled to reconcile their expectations of learning French with the many difficulties related to this endeavour. This was most telling at the affective level, where feelings of discouragement, anxiety and frustration tended to lead to disengagement. Out of the 31 responses asking students whether they would continue with French or not, 1 respondent said "no", 9 said "maybe" and 21 said "yes". However, at the end of the year, more than half of the first-year students did not continue. This finding demonstrates the difference between motivation and volition. Motivation simply refers to the intention to act, whereas volition is the will to put measures in place to carry out the action desired, and then to act (Broonen, 2007). According to Achtziger and Gollwitzer (2008), Action Psychology research demonstrates that motivation alone does not necessarily lead to achievement of goals; rather, 'action control strategies' must be implemented. In the case of the research carried out among students in the French department of the University of the Witwatersrand, language learning strategies were taken as action control strategies to be measured against intention to continue French studies. Nevertheless, despite learners having self-reported strategy use, the extent and effectiveness of their implementation was not assessed by the researcher through observation. The interviews demonstrated that while students may desire to learn the language (motivation), the volition to do the work itself is a different construct entirely. As the original research shows, perseverance is an important and enduring quality in students who continue.

Finally, students who had taken French at school were the most likely to continue through to third year level, indicating that longer exposure to the language over time was the highest predictor for student continuation rates in language learning at university level. This is unsurprising given the volume and intensity of undergraduate language courses which start at beginner level. It also begs the question as to whether lecturers should adjust their expectations of student performance and underscores the importance of teaching strategy use, in an explicit, intentional way, to students who have not been sufficiently prepared to learn languages.

5. Conclusion

In this article, we linked the issue of low student continuation rates and engagement in undergraduate French courses at the University of the Witwatersrand to the complexities of language learning which present unique academic, cognitive and motivational challenges. While explicit strategy instruction and external efforts to enhance learners' individual motivational factors such as self-efficacy have been the subject of much recent research, the case of the University of the Witwatersrand paints a more nuanced picture of the impact of these factors on learners' decisions to continue their studies. Amid a number of external factors

such as financial constraints and the Covid-19 crisis, the students who participated in the research indicated medium to high levels of language learning strategy use and self-efficacy beliefs. Nevertheless, student behaviour, as noted by lecturers and students in the interview phase of the research, as well as the numbers of actual students who continued their studies after stating a desire to do so, belied little volition to continue. Indeed, high self-reported strategy use and self-efficacy beliefs were revealed as inadequate and unrealistic in relation to the real cognitive and affective demands of language acquisition in the early phases of learning. The research therefore encourages explicit strategy instruction and heightened awareness of the affective dimension of learning but cautions that this is not necessarily a solution to dwindling student numbers in foreign language classrooms at higher learning institutions. More research would need to be conducted into perseverance in learning and assisting learners to translate their learning goals into actionable plans.

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Dr Fiona Horne is a senior lecturer in the Department of French and Francophone Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. Her research interests include the role of literature and culture in foreign language acquisition, native speaker ideologies, and more recently, neurodiversity and language learning.

Annexure 1: Modified SILL and MSLQ questionnaire

Partcicipant information sheet

1. Email
2. ☐ By continuing with this questionnaire, I consent to my anonymised data being used for the above research purposes
3. I am willing to be contacted by the researcher [Yes] [No]
4. Age
5. Year of study in French [First year] [Second year] [Third year] [Fourth year]

The strategy statements below were represented in an online questionnaire with a Likert scale response. The scale was five points for statements 1 - 66 and seven points for the remaining statements from the MSLQ. The SILL (Oxford, 1989) and MSLQ (Pintrich *et al*., 1991) scales are redacted. They are available at the sources listed above. The elements added by the researcher are provided below.

These questions assess the learning strategies you use in French language classes. Answer on the five point scale NEVER OR ALMOST NEVER TRUE OF ME means that the statement is very rarely true of you. USUALLY NOT TRUE OF ME means that the statement is true less than half the time. SOMEWHAT TRUE OF ME means that the statement is true of you about half the time. USUALLY TRUE OF ME means that the statement is true more than half the time. ALWAYS OR ALMOST ALWAYS TRUE OF ME means that the statement is true of you almost always.
Section A: Direct, memory, remembering more effectively
Section B: direct, cognitive, using all your mental processes
Section C: direct, compensation, compensating for missed knowledge.
Section D: Indirect, metacognitive, organising and evaluating your learning
Section E: Indirect, affective, managing your emotions.
Section F: Indirect, social, learning with others.
Technology assisted language learning strategies These statements assess beliefs about your learning. Answer on the 7 point scale where 1 = not at all true of me and 7 = always true of me.
51. I watch motivational videos online. (Media)

52. I use a digital calendar to plan my work for French studies. (Cognitive)
53. I use games to train my grammar skills in French studies. (Cognitive)
54. I search grammar points online to better understand them. (Cognitive)
55. I use online translators to look up short phrases from English to French. (Translation)
56. I use online translators to translate long passages from French to English. (Translation)
57. I use context dictionaries online. (Translation)
58. I use dictionaries online. (Translation)
59. I use videos to improve my listening skills. (Media)
60. I use podcasts to improve my listening skills. (Media)
61. I change the speed on podcasts and videos to train my listening skills. (Media)
62. I watch TV series and movies in French. (Media)
63. I use French subtitles when I watch French language media. (Media)
64. I use English subtitles when I watch French language media. (Translation)
65. I use learning apps to learn for French. (Cognitive)
66. I use social media to connect with native French speakers. (Cognitive)
Which learning apps do you use to connect with French and how do you use them?
Which social media do you use to connect with native French speakers and how do you do this?
MSLQ: Self-efficacy These statements assess beliefs about your learning. Answer on the 7 point scale where 1 = not at all true of me and 7 = always true of me
MSLQ: Perceptions of Autonomy and control
Intention to continue
Do you plan on continuing your studies in French after this year?
Why have you answered as such to the previous question?