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“Teaching French as a Foreign Language: Breaking the classroom boundaries”

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In today's scenario of globalisation, learning foreign languages has become an important skill towards a successful career. Teaching as well as learning a foreign language has evolved alongside Information Technology, which has transformed the way one learns a new language. Attending a language class, buying books and listening to the teacher, the journey doesn't end here. One cannot ignore the endless resources surrounding us and easily accessible to the common man through the internet, which has tremendously contributed in disseminating knowledge around the world in the past few years. Starting from e-books to downloadable audio and video files, learning a new language has never been so easy, but not without challenges. More than obtaining an official certification, learners are focussing on acquiring a real communicative competence in the foreign language through task based learning. As far as French is concerned, it is the second most widely learned foreign language in the world, with almost 120 million students and 500,000 teachers, who can access to an unlimited amount of academic resources. On the other hand, learners can explore various avenues in order to improve their four skills: writing, reading, listening and speaking. In this paper, we are going to explore some of the online resources offered to students keen to improve their French outside the class hours. First, we will be going through a few apps, providing the basic foundation for beginners, and then we will look at a few websites, offering useful resources for both learners as well as teachers.

Teaching cum learning French through mobile applications

Classroom teaching as well as learning can no more be confined to four walls, and especially when it comes to acquiring a foreign language, the avenues are endless for both the trainers and the learners, who are not bound to follow the traditional methodology anymore. Language classroom is no longer the sole territory of the teacher, who is considered to be an instructor or a facilitator rather than a bearer of knowledge; therefore he must rethink his strategies and attitudes in order to focus on a learner-centred approach. In this context, mobile

assisted language learning provides learners with new platforms to explore language skills. Indeed, ever since mobile technologies have become affordable, language learning applications have revolutionised the way languages are learned. Google play store as well as Apple store are literally flooded with unlimited number of apps claiming to offer numerous ways to learn any foreign language, at the comfort of your home and at your own pace. French has become one of the most sought out foreign languages that learners are keen in mastering for personal as well as professional reasons, hence they are often on the lookout for new innovative means of discovering the language of Napoleon, through their mobile devices, easily connected to internet. Amidst the various French learning mobile applications, we will explore a few and attempt to find out how effective and useful are these resources. One of the most popular language learning app is “**Duolingo**” which offers users an opportunity to learn not only French, but also any twenty one languages online, free of cost, through various modules composed of different lessons, made up of activities enabling registered users to track their progress. We are introduced to a lot of words classified under various topics, such as “Introduction, travel, restaurant, family, shopping, school, emotions, leisure, directions, food, animals, ect...” During each lesson, users are required to complete some tasks, starting from translation exercises, matching exercises, listening exercises and speaking exercises. In order to go to the next level, learners have to complete the exercises successfully, making it more challenging in terms of language acquisition. Based on the concept of audio-lingual drilling, **Duolingo** teaches its users a foreign language via translation, by making them memorise vocabulary and short phrases pertaining to a specific topic, making it a good way for an absolute beginner to get started with a new language. Unlike the previous one, our next language learning app is lesser known, but can be easily downloaded and used offline. Named “**French vocabulary by topics**”, this mobile app offers its learners a large range of basic French vocabulary, classified into themes, such as fruits, vegetables, music, animals, technology, health, weather, education, and so on. Each word is written in French, accompanied by its English translation along with an illustration, to facilitate our comprehension. Moreover, the app provides the user with the opportunity to listen to each and every word, as many times as required, in what seems to be the voice of a native speaker, thus offering the learners to get more acquainted with an authentic French pronunciation. Moreover, we are exposed to a unique range of topics, such as tools, environment, abstract terms, architecture, thus motivating the learners to look beyond the usual themes studied in class. The next French language app is quite similar to the latter one, offering a wide range of vocabulary under various topics. However, “**Bravolol**” is a language

app focussing more on words and phrases used in a specific context. Learners can discover not only words but also sentences using them, the whole process being facilitated by a translation as well as the French pronunciation. For instance, under the category ‘health’, users discover not only words related to the parts of the body, but they also learn how to talk about their physical ailment, hence they can listen to sentences such as *“j’ai mal au ventre”* (I’ve a stomachache), *“j’ai du mal à respirer”* (I’ve trouble breathing), or *“j’ai la tête qui tourne”* (I feel dizzy). Similarly, under the topic ‘eating’, we are exposed to vocabulary related to food preferences, along with key phrases used to talk about food in a restaurant, such as *“Avez-vous des plats végétariens?”* (Do you have vegetarian dishes?) or *“J’aimerais une table dans un espace non-fumeur”* (I’d like a table in a non-smoking area). A context based vocabulary enables the learners to understand their purpose and motivates them in applying their knowledge in similar situations. The final app we are going to present is a bilingual dictionary, which can be handy for beginners who have already been exposed to basic French lexicon. Named **“Ascendo’s French-English dictionary”**, the comprehensive offline tool offers more than four hundred entries, with audio pronunciation in both languages, making it an essential tool during a day to day conversation. The particularity of this app is that it also includes other options such as a phrase book, a verb conjugator, vocabulary quizzes and a translator, making it a boon for any French learner. One very important point is that the app works offline, hence unreliable internet connection will not hinder the learning experience. There are countless number of French language learning apps available online and offline, however only a few follow a learner-centred approach, and are customised in a user friendly way, making it possible for anybody to acquire independently a basic knowledge of the language, provided they have the time and the passion to learn, without getting confused by complicated instructions or losing interest due to mundane exercises. Language apps have to always face the challenge of sustaining users’ attention and curiosity, making it necessary to often update their content with innovative features. In this context, we have looked into four mobile apps, which could help any learner to successfully gain knowledge in French to a certain extent. Moreover, teachers can motivate their students to explore these French language apps, outside class hours, to keep them engaged through a wide range of content, from audio and video to quizzes and games, enabling them to practise French. However, these language apps are only supplements and cannot substitute a language class, neither can they be as effective as a language immersion, providing the learner with an actual linguistic cum cultural exposure. One cannot ignore the fact that most of the language learning apps teach vocabulary and grammar detached from any context, making it quite arduous for any learner to leap spontaneously into a conversation in a new language, without knowing in depth its’ nuances or its’ basic syntactic structures.

Aiming for a communicative competence

Our next segment will deal with a few reliable websites offering great educational resources for both teachers and learners. As far as foreign language is concerned, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) has provided common basis description of objectives, content and methods for teaching all European languages, implementing an official framework, which could serve as a guideline for teachers to evaluate the learners in terms of different skills. Hence, many French language websites follow the standards of the European council, by providing activities based on the different levels, starting from beginner to proficient, enabling the students to view and work on appropriate contents. The most popular ones are “www.bonjourdefrance.com” and www.lepointdufle.net” providing students with various audio and video files, accompanied by activities, but most of their contents and instructions are in French, hence a real beginner may not be able to comprehend everything. Thus, we have compiled a list of a few websites offering activities and explanations for English speaking learners, keen to improve their French knowledge and to enhance their communicative skills. The first website has been designed by French teachers for the benefit of learners around the world: “***Frenchbyfrench.com***”. The lessons are divided into four levels: beginner 1, beginner 2, intermediate and advanced, each one composed of various segments focussing on vocabulary and grammar points, with simple English explanations, translations exercises along with downloadable files, so that students can access to them offline. Each segment starts with a short audio clip, with the transcript in both French and English, followed by a glossary, an explanation about a grammatical concept, and finally some translation activities, with a link to download the entire lesson. Our next website is “***Lingolia.com***”, an online platform for discovering the fundamentals of French grammar, starting from nouns, articles, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions to sentence structure. Each segment is made of subsections focussing on a particular aspect, accompanied by examples with English translation, before winding up with some exercises. For instance, the section on adjectives focuses on three characteristics, namely “adjective endings, adjective placement and comparative form of adjectives”. Similarly, the lesson on pronouns is divided into many parts, each one exploring a particular category of pronoun, such as “personal pronouns, reflexive pronouns, possessive pronouns, relative pronouns, etc..” The explanations are written in such a way that any Anglophone would be able to grasp the crux of the matter. Our next website, called “***Français interactif***”, is the brainchild developed by a team at the University of Texas, and aims to discover the French language and culture through the experiences of real students

who took part in a summer program in the French city of Lyon. We get to know about their host families, their French university and their lives in this beautiful city. Each lesson starts with a short video clip, where one of the UT student attempts to speak in French in a specific context. Hearing French from non native speakers contributes to create an authentic classroom atmosphere, providing an insight into the life of students trying to learn French through an immersion program. They share about their views when coming into contact with the language they are exposed to. In addition to video clips, the website includes phonetic lessons, grammar explanations and recorded vocabulary. The downloadable audio cum video files are rich pedagogical resources which can be easily used in a language classroom. The next website, titled “*Audio-Lingua*” offers mp3 recordings in several languages including French. Initially designed as an archive of short audio clips, the website provides audio files at different levels, wherein we can listen to native speakers talking about their day to day life, the speed at which they speak varies upon the level selected through a search engine. Besides, learners can also choose a particular theme based on which they can access to the conversations revolving around it. For instance, if we wish to hear about the environment, the search engine gives us a compilation of clips, wherein a person talks about being a vegan, or explaining about recyclables. Despite the fact that transcripts of clips are not available, learners can nevertheless download the audio file and listen to it as many number of times required. A great resource for anybody interested in getting familiarised with the French pronunciation, just for the pleasure of listening to somebody speaking the language of love! This list of websites for learning French is not exhaustive, but we have attempted to compile a few online websites which could serve as great resources for teachers, trying to making use of innovative ways in order to effectively reach their students. Similarly, French learners can benefit from the pedagogical content offered by these websites, and focus on improving any specific aspect of the language, refreshing their basic knowledge or sharpen their communicative skills by listening to real life conversations. Despite the fact that a good internet connection is required to access to these resources, they provide innumerable ways to acquire French, without the hassle of going through grammar books or dictionaries.

The advancement in information technology has changed our lives, and our learning process, making the classroom an interactive space, where knowledge is shared rather than being a one way approach. Though a teacher cannot be substituted by any form of technology, integrating such online tools can only boost the learners, thus such powerful resources cannot be ignored, but they have to be used with moderation.

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Sitography

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