

## **STUDY OF FRENCH LANGUAGE LEARNING DIFFICULTIES IN HOSPITALITY STUDENTS AT MEDAN TOURISM POLYTECHNIC**

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### **Abstract**

This study aims to identify the forms of difficulties faced by hospitality students in learning French, analyze the causal factors, and formulate effective learning strategies to overcome these obstacles. The method used is descriptive qualitative with the main instrument in the form of a questionnaire filled out by 87 respondents of students of the Hospitality Department of the Medan Tourism Polytechnic. Data were analyzed through frequency tabulation and triangulation to obtain more comprehensive results. The results of the study indicate that the main forms of difficulties experienced by students include difficulties in memorizing vocabulary, understanding grammar, pronouncing words correctly, and forming simple sentences. These difficulties are exacerbated by a lack of confidence in speaking, low learning motivation, non-contextual teaching methods, limited learning media, and minimal opportunities for language practice in and outside the classroom. As a solution, this study recommends communicative and project-based learning strategies, such as hotel service simulations, patterned dialogues, and the use of audio-visual media and digital platforms to strengthen understanding and pronunciation. The application of this strategy is considered effective in increasing students' interest in learning, practical skills, and confidence in using French in the hospitality context.

**Keywords:** Learning difficulties, French language, hospitality students, learning strategies

### **A. INTRODUCTION**

In vocational education, particularly in the field of hospitality, proficiency in a foreign language is one of the core competencies that students must acquire. Foreign language skills are not merely complementary but have become a concrete demand in the international hospitality industry. French is one of the foreign languages taught due to its historical and functional significance in the global culinary, gastronomy, and hotel sectors. However, despite its strong relevance, field observations show that students often face various

challenges in learning the language, ranging from linguistic barriers to non-linguistic factors that affect the learning process.

The primary difficulties students face involve differences in phonetic structure and grammar between French and Indonesian. Many students struggle with pronunciation due to inconsistencies between spelling and sound, as well as the presence of silent letters in French. Moreover, grammatical aspects such as gendered nouns, verb conjugations, and strict sentence structure are often

confusing for beginners. These complexities require time and consistent practice to master. Without a strong foundation, many students lose confidence in speaking and participate less actively in class.

The learning difficulties are not limited to linguistic aspects but are also influenced by students' educational backgrounds and learning motivation. Many students have never studied a foreign language before, making it harder to adapt to French. Additionally, foreign language learning is often perceived as a secondary subject, less important than practical courses. Teaching methods that focus too heavily on theory, combined with limited speaking practice, insufficient access to audiovisual learning materials, and the lack of a supportive environment for practicing French outside the classroom, further intensify the challenges.

At Medan Tourism Polytechnic, mastering the French language plays a strategic role in preparing graduates to compete in the international hospitality industry. However, if students already face barriers at the basic level, it becomes difficult for them to develop their competencies further. Therefore, a systematic and in-depth analysis of the difficulties encountered in French learning is necessary to develop appropriate and relevant solutions. This study is expected to provide valuable input not only for this institution but also for other vocational education providers in improving the contextual and practical effectiveness of foreign language instruction.

The research questions in this study are:

(1) what types of difficulties are encountered by students in learning French, (2) what factors contribute to

these learning difficulties, and (3) what learning strategies can help overcome the challenges faced by vocational hospitality students in acquiring basic French proficiency. The objectives of this research are to identify the specific forms of difficulties encountered by students, analyze the underlying factors that hinder the French learning process, and propose relevant and effective teaching strategies tailored to the needs of vocational education settings.

This study is expected to offer both theoretical and practical benefits, specifically by contributing to the development of foreign language education in vocational contexts and providing useful insights for lecturers, students, and institutions to improve teaching strategies, learning resources, and support programs tailored to hospitality students learning French.

## **B. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **1. The Essence of French Language Learning in Vocational Hospitality Education.**

Foreign language learning in vocational education, particularly French, plays a vital role in equipping students with cross-cultural communication skills required in the global hospitality industry. At Medan Tourism Polytechnic, French is taught for only one semester, yet it remains a strategic subject that enhances graduates' competitiveness. The essence of French language learning in vocational education goes beyond linguistic knowledge; it also focuses on developing students' professional competencies. Richards (2017) emphasizes that language instruction in vocational settings should be needs-based, contextual, and applicable to real-world professional environments to be truly effective.

Given the limited instructional time, French language materials must be carefully selected and taught with maximum efficiency. The Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) approach, as proposed by Ellis (2020), is highly suitable for vocational contexts because it emphasizes language use in completing real-world tasks—such as simulating front-desk conversations or restaurant interactions in French. Furthermore, Byram (2018) stresses the importance of intercultural learning, where students not only acquire language skills but also understand cultural norms, politeness strategies, and expectations of Francophone guests. In this sense, French language learning becomes a means of preparing students for professional intercultural communication.

The time constraints of a one-semester course demand precise teaching strategies. Nation and Newton (2020) advocate for a focus on high-frequency language use to improve the efficiency of language acquisition in vocational settings. Celce-Murcia et al. (2014) also highlight the effectiveness of communicative and practice-based teaching methods such as role playing, simulations, and groupwork—which help build learners' confidence in using the language in real-life situations. Therefore, French instruction in hospitality education serves not only as a transfer of linguistic knowledge but also as a tool for developing functional communication skills essential for multilingual professional environments.

## **2. French Language Learning in the Context of Vocational Hospitality Education**

French language learning in vocational hospitality education plays a crucial role in preparing students to meet the

demands of the global tourism industry. At Medan Tourism Polytechnic, French is taught over a single semester, yet it remains essential in enhancing graduates' multilingual service capabilities, especially when interacting with guests from Francophone countries. According to Richards (2017), language instruction in vocational settings must be needs-based, contextual, and applicable, aligning with real-life professional tasks. Ellis (2020) supports this through the Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) approach, which emphasizes using language to complete functional tasks such as role-plays in hotel or restaurant settings, making it highly suitable for short-term, skill-oriented programs.

In addition to linguistic competence, vocational French learning must also develop students' intercultural understanding and communication etiquette. Byram (2018) emphasizes that foreign language education should be intercultural; students must learn not only how to express themselves in French but also understand cultural norms and expectations within service interactions. Time constraints in vocational curricula require focused content delivery; Nation and Newton (2020) suggest prioritizing high-frequency language use for maximum efficiency. Meanwhile, Celce-Murcia et al. (2014) advocate for communicative and interactive teaching strategies, including simulations, groupwork, and real-world tasks, which are proven to build learner confidence and foster practical communication skills essential in multilingual hospitality environments.

## **3. The Position and Function of the French Language in the Hospitality Industry.**

French occupies a strategic position in the global hospitality industry. According to the Organisation Internationale de la

Francophonie (OIF, 2022), French is an official language in more than 29 countries and is spoken by over 300 million people worldwide. Countries where French is widely used—such as France, Belgium, Canada (Quebec), and Switzerland—are developed nations with high international tourist mobility. Therefore, the ability to communicate in French is a significant added value for hospitality professionals, particularly in delivering quality service to international guests.

The function of French in the hospitality sector extends beyond verbal communication; it also includes understanding service requests, interpreting documents, and applying culturally appropriate etiquette. Tardieu & Dolitsky (2019) emphasize that foreign language proficiency among hotel staff significantly enhances guest satisfaction, customer loyalty, and the institution's professional image. Thus, French serves three key roles in hospitality: as a medium of international communication, a foundation for excellent service, and a marker of professionalism in cross-cultural interactions. French language instruction in vocational education must reflect these strategic roles to ensure graduates are equipped to compete in the global industry.

**4. The Objectives of French Language Learning in Vocational Education.** The objectives of French language learning in vocational education go beyond mastering linguistic elements such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation; they also focus on developing professional competencies relevant to the workplace. Richards (2017) emphasizes that language instruction in vocational contexts should be needs-based, communicatively meaningful, and directly applicable to real-world job tasks. Therefore, French

instruction is designed to equip students with the ability to communicate effectively in workplace situations such as welcoming guests, responding to service requests, or explaining hotel facilities.

In addition, French language learning aims to build students' intercultural readiness when interacting with international guests. Byram (2018) argues that language teaching must be intercultural in nature, fostering an understanding of the social norms and cultural values embedded in language use. This ensures that students are not only capable of speaking in French but are also sensitive to the expectations and etiquette of guests from Francophone cultures. Thus, French language education in vocational settings serves to prepare graduates who are not only linguistically competent but also professionally capable and culturally aware in the global hospitality industry.

### **5. The Relevance of French Language Materials to Hospitality Work Practice**

For French language learning to be meaningful in vocational education, the materials must be relevant to real work situations. Long (2015) emphasizes that the effectiveness of language instruction for vocational purposes depends on how well the content aligns with actual tasks students will face after graduation. In the hospitality field, this includes vocabulary and sentence structures used in hotel, restaurant, and tourism settings—such as receptionist–guest dialogues, room service instructions, restaurant conversations, and complaint handling. Such relevance not only increases student motivation but also bridges the gap between classroom learning and workplace practice.

In addition, cultural context should be integrated into the materials. Kramsch (2013) argues that effective foreign language learning must include elements of the target culture, as language and culture are inseparable. Therefore, French language materials in vocational hospitality programs should also include cultural aspects of service, polite expressions, and typical French guest communication styles, which may differ significantly from local norms.

### 6. Difficulties in Learning the French Language

One of the fundamental challenges in learning French is linguistic difficulty, which includes phonology, vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure. French pronunciation (such as nasal sounds, liaison, and intonation) differs significantly from Indonesian, creating confusion for students. Grammar issues like verb conjugation, noun gender, and complex tenses add to the burden. Ellis (2015) explains that second language acquisition is gradual and shaped by the learner's interlanguage. Krashen (2018), through his Input Hypothesis, stresses the importance of comprehensible input tailored to students' proficiency. Unfortunately, in vocational education, French language input is often insufficient and lacks context, as also noted by Lightbown and Spada (2021), who argue that limited exposure and meaningful practice hinder linguistic competence.

Affective difficulties also play a major role in learning outcomes. Many students experience anxiety, low confidence, demotivation, or negative attitudes toward French, especially when they fail to see its relevance to their future work. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2021) highlight motivation as a key factor, influenced by social context and past learning

experiences. Gardner and Lambert (2019), in their Socio-Educational Model, emphasize that learners' attitudes toward the target language and culture significantly impact motivation. Students who lack confidence or had prior negative language learning experiences may avoid speaking activities, reducing their engagement and learning opportunities.

Cognitive challenges further complicate French language acquisition. Students must simultaneously process vocabulary, grammar rules, pronunciation, and cultural context, which can lead to cognitive overload. Sweller (2019), in his Cognitive Load Theory, notes that poorly designed instruction overwhelms the brain's working memory, obstructing learning. Mayer (2020) supports the use of multimodal instruction—verbal and visual elements—to enhance comprehension and retention. However, in vocational contexts, French instruction often relies heavily on text-based, one-directional methods, which limits students' ability to process and internalize the content effectively.

Lastly, the lack of learning strategies and contextual relevance in hospitality education presents serious obstacles. Many students lack awareness of effective language learning strategies—such as time management, vocabulary review, or use of digital tools—which leads to frustration. Oxford (2017) categorizes strategies into cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social, all of which support self-directed learning. Nunan (2015) underscores the need for learner-centered approaches to foster autonomy. Compounding the problem is the disconnection between classroom learning and real-world hospitality tasks. Without real-life simulations or partnerships with French-speaking industries, students struggle to see the



practical value of French, making learning seem abstract and un motivating. This contradicts the principles of Competency-Based Learning (CBL), which advocate for aligning instruction with workplace standards and skills.

### **7. Factors Affecting Learning Difficulties**

Learning motivation greatly influences the success of acquiring French as a foreign language. Intrinsic motivation—such as interest in French culture or the desire to work in the international hospitality industry—and extrinsic motivation—such as academic requirements and future job opportunities—both play a crucial role in driving students' learning efforts. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2021) emphasize that strong motivation enhances student engagement, leading to more active participation and persistence. Conversely, low motivation can lead to a lack of focus and disengagement. In vocational settings like hospitality programs, institutions should strengthen students' motivation by emphasizing the practical importance of French in real-world professional contexts.

Learning media, teaching methods, and the learning environment also significantly impact students' ease or difficulty in learning. Oxford (2017) states that the use of audiovisual materials and digital tools strengthens foreign language comprehension, especially when teaching emphasizes communicative and task-based approaches. However, overly traditional or memorization-based methods may cause cognitive overload (Sweller, 2019), especially if students are overwhelmed with complex or excessive input. A lack of language exposure outside the classroom or inadequate facilities can further hinder students' ability to practice and internalize the language naturally.

In addition, students' academic background, learning styles, and teacher competence

influence their ability to overcome challenges in learning French. Those with prior experience in learning other foreign languages tend to adapt more easily. Different learning styles—visual, auditory, and kinesthetic—should be acknowledged (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021), as mismatched teaching approaches can hinder comprehension. Teacher quality and institutional support are also critical. According to Oxford (2017), effective educators who use varied methods and provide constructive feedback can help students succeed. On the other hand, inadequate facilities and rigid teaching approaches may worsen learning difficulties and decrease students' confidence in using French actively.

### **8. Learning strategies that can help overcome difficulties in basic French language learning for hospitality students.**

Effective learning strategies are crucial in helping hospitality students overcome difficulties in learning basic French. Richards (2006) emphasizes that audiovisual media enrich the language learning experience by exposing students to authentic accents, expressions, and situational usage. Similarly, Nation and Newton (2009) argue that speaking practice through role-play enables learners to develop fluency by simulating real-life communication in safe classroom settings. When it comes to independent learning, Godwin-Jones (2011) states that language learning apps enhance learner autonomy and motivation through personalized and interactive features, making them ideal tools for basic language acquisition.

Contextual learning is another key aspect. According to Graves (2008), relating learning material to specific professional contexts, such as hospitality, increases relevance and promotes deeper comprehension.

ion. Moreover, group discussions have been shown to support cooperative learning and critical thinking, which, as noted by Gillies (2007), improve both language use and understanding through peer collaboration. Lastly, instructor feedback is essential for learning progress; Bitchener and Ferris (2012) stress that detailed and constructive feedback helps students recognize patterns of errors and refine their language skills more effectively.

### C. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach aimed at exploring in depth the difficulties encountered by hospitality students in learning French at the Medan Tourism Polytechnic. Data collection techniques include classroom observation to directly observe the learning dynamics, documentation to obtain secondary data such as syllabi and teaching materials, and questionnaires to identify the types of difficulties, their causes, and the learning strategies students consider effective. The questionnaire is also used to obtain systematic and analyzable data. The study population includes all hospitality students enrolled in the French language course, while the sample will be selected purposively—students who have taken at least one semester of French and can provide relevant insights.

The data will be analyzed thematically, starting with transcription and filtering, grouping key themes, interpretation, and drawing conclusions. Possible themes include linguistic, cognitive, and affective difficulties, as well as issues related to the vocational relevance of the material. To enhance the validity and reliability of the findings, data triangulation will be conducted by comparing results from observations, documentation, and questionnaires. This analysis technique aims to provide a comprehensive picture of the challenges

faced by hospitality students in learning French and offer insights into effective solutions within a vocational education context.

### D. RESEARCH RESULT

The data were obtained from the distribution of questionnaires to students via Google Forms using a Likert scale, consisting of 20 statements divided into three categories: types of difficulties, factors causing the difficulties, and learning strategies. A total of 87 respondents successfully participated in this study. Based on the results of data triangulation, the primary learning difficulties experienced by hospitality students in learning French are linguistic and affective in nature. A total of 62% of respondents reported difficulties in pronunciation, a key feature of the French language that differs significantly from Indonesian in terms of sound and intonation. Additionally, 57% of students acknowledged challenges in understanding grammar and sentence structure, while 60.9% reported difficulty in memorizing vocabulary. Affective factors also emerged prominently, with 44.8% expressing anxiety when speaking in class and 47.1% specifically admitting to feeling nervous when required to speak French. Moreover, 62.1% of students believed that the lack of speaking practice contributed significantly to their difficulties.

The causes of these learning challenges stem from both internal and external factors. Internally, 27.5% of students agreed that they lacked motivation, while 42.5% responded neutrally, suggesting a widespread disengagement. Many students perceived French as less essential than other foreign languages, such as English, for their future careers in hospitality. Externally, 56.3% reported that class time was insufficient, and

40.2% indicated that available learning facilities were inadequate. Interestingly, only 9.2% found the teaching methods unappealing, implying that while method variation may be lacking, it was not the main issue compared to other factors.

To address these challenges, students proposed several effective learning strategies. A majority of 67.8% emphasized the importance of contextual materials linked to real-world hospitality settings (hotels/restaurants). 56.3% found audiovisual materials helpful, and 59.8% felt more confident when engaging in group speaking practice. Additionally, 66.7% appreciated receiving feedback from lecturers as a means to improve their performance. Notably, 43.6% of students agreed that project-based learning could increase motivation, while 54% responded neutrally. These findings suggest that a shift toward practical, communicative, and context-based instruction—aligned with the vocational needs of students—can significantly enhance learning outcomes in basic French for hospitality education.

## E. DISCUSSION

Hospitality students face various challenges in learning French, particularly in linguistic aspects such as vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, and pronunciation. In terms of vocabulary, students often confuse similar-sounding words with different meanings, such as *la carte* (menu) and *le menu* (meal package). Words like *l'addition* (bill) are often unfamiliar, and *commander* (to order) is frequently mistaken for *demander* (to ask). These vocabulary difficulties make it hard for students to follow basic service-related conversations in hospitality contexts. Regarding grammar, students tend to memorize conjugation tables without understanding how to apply them. For instance, they

frequently write *je parler français* instead of the correct *je parle français*, showing a lack of awareness in subject-verb agreement and tense usage.

Sentence structure is another major issue, especially when forming negative sentences. Students often say *je ne parle pas français* or *je ne parle français*, when the correct structure is *je ne parle pas français*. Their misunderstanding of where to place negation elements and auxiliary verbs makes sentence construction challenging. In terms of pronunciation, French nasal sounds such as *an*, *en*, and *un* are unfamiliar to Indonesian learners. Words like *vin blanc* are mispronounced as “vin blang” and *bon appétit* as “bon apetit.” Even simple words like *français* are often pronounced “fran-ses” instead of “frã-sɛ,” indicating the strong influence of Indonesian phonetic patterns.

These linguistic challenges stem from both internal and external factors. Internally, many students have low motivation, perceiving French as less relevant than English in the hospitality industry. This lack of interest, combined with fear of making mistakes and low self-confidence, discourages them from practicing. Externally, limited classroom hours (only 2 hours per week) are insufficient for mastering four language skills plus cultural elements. Inadequate learning facilities, such as a lack of language labs or authentic audio materials, further restrict listening and speaking practice. Teaching methods that focus heavily on grammar tables and vocabulary lists, without linking them to real-world hospitality situations, make it harder for students to grasp the practical value of learning French.

To address these issues, active, communicative, and contextual learning strategies



are essential. Interactive media—such as French dialogue videos, hospitality-themed songs, and vocabulary apps—can improve both pronunciation and comprehension. Role-play activities are also highly effective. For example, students can simulate situations such as room reservations or restaurant service, using phrases like *Bonjour madame, souhaitez-vous un café ?* Additionally, project-based learning (PjBL) encourages students to apply their language skills in real-world tasks, such as creating a video of breakfast service or designing a French-language tourism brochure. These strategies help students move beyond memorization and engage with French in practical, professional contexts—making learning more meaningful, motivating, and industry-relevant.

## F. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The conclusion of this study shows that hospitality students still face significant challenges in learning French, particularly in linguistic aspects such as vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and verb conjugation. These difficulties affect their speaking and writing skills and result in low self-confidence when using the language, especially in oral communication.

The causes of these difficulties stem from both internal and external factors. Internally, students often lack motivation, fear making mistakes, and show limited interest in French. Externally, obstacles include limited learning time, teaching methods that are not context-based, a lack of media and learning facilities, and an unsupportive classroom environment. Theoretical-heavy instruction also creates a gap between what is taught in class and what is needed in the hospitality industry.

To overcome these issues, several strategies have been proven effective, such as using audiovisual media, role-play simulations, cooperative learning, communicative approaches, and project-based learning. These strategies help increase student engagement, improve confidence, and make language learning more relevant to real-life situations in hospitality, such as serving guests in restaurants, hotels, and front offices.

Recommendations include implementing project-based learning that mimics real-world hospitality scenarios, such as restaurant or hotel services simulations. Institutions should enhance learning facilities by providing language labs, audiovisual equipment, and access to interactive digital learning platforms. Regular training workshops for French instructors are encouraged to promote communicative and practical teaching approaches. Additionally, students who lack confidence should receive motivational support, and the classroom should be made a safe, encouraging space. Practical activities such as role-plays, mini-dramas, structured dialogues, and vlog projects should be conducted more frequently. French learning should also be directly connected to the demands of the hospitality industry, including opportunities to practice with foreign guests for real-world exposure.

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