



ATTITUDES OF GREEK FRENCH LANGUAGE TEACHERS ON THE DISTANCE TEACHING OF FRENCH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract:

The period of the pandemic and the imposed distance teaching in all educational institutions for almost two years changed the way of approaching the subjects on many levels. Teachers were called upon in difficult circumstances and under pressure to adapt their teaching materials, to prioritize their teaching techniques differently, to make use of the available modern and asynchronous communication platforms, restructuring their teaching accordingly. In this article we will present the results of a qualitative research conducted between March-May 2023 in the region of Thessaloniki, aiming to investigate the views of French teachers of public secondary and primary education on the distance teaching of French as a foreign language. The survey involved 20 permanent and contractual French language teachers who were teaching in secondary and primary education during the period of the health crisis. A semi-structured interview was used as a research instrument in order to have a question guide leading to specific answers. Specifically, the following axes, which are the research questions of the study, were posed: a) how did they organize the foreign language lesson during distance education and which teaching techniques were chosen; b) which tools of the WebEx educational platform were used; c) to what extent did they use the educational platforms e-class & E-me education; d) how did they evaluate the degree of development of students' linguistic communicative and pragmatic skills? e) what do they consider to be the main obstacles in distance teaching of foreign language? The teachers in the study have responded to the new challenging data, adapted their teaching practice and raised questions and concerns about distance teaching of French as a foreign language.

Keywords: teaching, French language, distance learning, distance teaching, modern and asynchronous communication platforms, teaching techniques

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1. Introduction

In March 2020, due to the health crisis, the suspension of physical attendance courses in all educational institutions was imposed worldwide and compulsory distance learning was introduced. In Greece, schools of all levels were initially closed on 11 March 2020 and remained closed until 31 May 2020. This was the first quarantine period of about 2.5 months. The circular No. F8/38091/D4/16-3-2020 of the Ministry of Education states the first instructions on how distance teaching of all subjects will be implemented: the electronic platform WebEx is proposed as a synchronous teaching platform and two asynchronous teaching platforms, e-class and E-me education, are also proposed. The Ministry's document states that distance learning is considered to be the most appropriate approach in order to maintain communication between students and teachers and to continue the educational process in the context of the emergency experienced by the whole planet. The document stresses that distance learning cannot replace face-to-face teaching.

According to the first guidance document of the Ministry of Education, on March 16, 2020, the use of digital technologies has as a priority to implement distance teaching and communication between teachers and students. It is stated that the process will be implemented by each teacher either with synchronous or asynchronous teaching methods, or a combination. In the same document, some links to existing digital structures were given, such as interactive textbooks, digital educational material from the Institute of Educational Policy and some websites of educational scenarios, such as the "Aesopos" platform, the Centre for Greek Language, etc. This was followed by new instructions specifying the implementation of distance education. Educational television was added to the platforms, WebEx for synchronous and e-class and E-me for asynchronous (Kelesidis, 2021). The second suspension period due to the health crisis starts on 16 November 2020 until 23 December, with a duration of 6 weeks. The third period, also for the same 2020-21 school year, started on 4 March 2021 until 23 April, with a duration of 7.5 weeks. The total duration of the suspension of school units in the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years totaled 23 weeks (Kelesidis, 2021), a very long period of time away from the physical space of students and teachers, which is the real classroom (Jarrar, 2022).

2. Literature review

2.1. Distance learning as an integral part of pedagogy and education

Distance education is certainly not a new concept introduced into the vocabulary of the educational community because of the pandemic. According to Lionarakis (1998), the trial period for the operation and implementation of distance education has been over for many years and now, with the enrichment of web technologies, it has expanded, opening 'windows' to new paths and innovative new applications. The period of the pandemic and the compulsory suspension of face-to-face courses have brought to light unknown

aspects of distance learning and highlighted the potential it can offer to the educational community. At the same time, several problems and difficulties arose relating to the degree of familiarity of the subjects (teachers and pupils) with digital media, technological knowledge, the management of virtual classrooms, the organization of teaching, the choice of techniques and media, and the assessment of skills. The compulsory distance mode of operation of educational institutions gathered teachers into learning communities for support and communication, as the difficulties, especially during the first months of course suspension, were insurmountable (Kelesidis 2021; Özüdoğru, 2021).

Information transfer tools were enriched due to rapid technological development, and the cultivation of digital literacy emerged as an urgent need, yet some fundamental pedagogical questions still exist and create constructive debates and reflections among researchers. Questions related to factors affecting the quality of learning, ways of more effective learning and teaching, and metacognition demand answers, as feasible as answers to such thorny questions may be, and certainly the debate articulated around them cannot be one-sided and one-dimensional. It is important to emphasize that while in most Western European countries distance education was established and complemented an already structured system of teaching and learning, in Greece the exact opposite happened: distance education was introduced as a structured system of pedagogical concepts and started to give answers to key pedagogical questions regarding the production of educational material, assessment, teaching and learning processes (Lionarakis, 1998; Nikolaou, 2022) and of course during the period of the health crisis it was a major concern for the educational community, as it was necessarily the main form of education and placed teachers and students in a completely unfamiliar context (Hean, & Chairassamee, 2023).

2.2. The teaching of French as a foreign language in Greece

The teaching of French as a foreign language starts in the last two grades of primary school and is taught for 2 hours per week in each class. Teachers choose the textbook for their class from among those proposed by the Ministry of Education. The language proficiency level is A1-. French at secondary school is taught for 2 hours per week in all three classes (A1 & A1+ level). The basic textbook is Action.Fr.1 In high school, French is taught for 2 hours in the first grade (A2 level), in the second grade for 1 hour (A2+ level) and in the third grade for 1 hour for students preparing for admission to university courses such as French Language and Literature, Translation and Interpreting, Media Education, etc. (language level B1). The New Curriculum for Foreign Languages (2021) proposes modern themes (everyday life, aspects of culture, leisure, etc.) and is based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Foreign Languages (2021). At the high school level, scenario building is proposed and teaching techniques such as discussion, dialogue, concept mapping, learning centers, role-playing, brainstorming are suggested to promote teamwork, inclusion, and differentiation of teaching. According to the Common Curriculum for Secondary and Primary School (2016) and the New

Curriculum for Secondary School (2021), the experiential perspective is at the heart of the teaching of French as a foreign language. The activities of escalating the difficulty of the proposed scenarios place students in an authentic communicative situation and ask them to fulfil tasks in order to reach the final effort and complete a project. Alternative techniques (portfolio, rubrics, self-assessment) are proposed to assess skills, alongside formal written examinations administered in the traditional way (paper-pencil). The stake in the forced imposition of distance education was how foreign language teachers could adapt face-to-face teaching to distance education without the necessary theoretical and practical background.

3. Problem statement

During the period of compulsory distance and distance education, teachers of all disciplines were asked to adapt their teaching to new data, without in many cases having received the appropriate training in advance. In Greece, there is a training program of the Ministry of Education on the pedagogical use of information and communication technologies in teaching practice, which is structured in three levels: Level A (basic use, initial familiarity with new technologies), Level B1 (introduction to the concept of micro-scenario in teaching) and Level B2 (introduction to the teaching scenario using web technologies and classroom application). These programs are implemented either remotely, face-to-face or hybrid (mixed model). In particular, a fairly high percentage (80%) of foreign-language teachers in Greece had received basic training in the pedagogical use of web technologies at level A (initial use of the computer without emphasis on teaching the foreign language) and a smaller percentage (40%) had received level B1 training (use of digital tools, collaborative platforms, integration of electronic resources into teaching materials, design of micro-scenarios). The B2 level training of foreign language teachers started in March 2020 and coincided with the mandatory suspension of physical attendance courses. This training program foresees the creation of digital scenarios and the integration of innovative techniques such as timelines, podcasts/vodcasts, digital storytelling, as well as the critical use of authentic sources and web exploration. In this context, the majority of French language teachers were, initially, in a state of ignorance of the new context and were asked to develop strategies to adapt to the new context. A small percentage who attended the B2 training on the use of new technologies in foreign language teaching during the first phase of the course suspension (March-May 2020) benefited during the compulsory distance teaching, because they were asked to implement online classroom activities using digital media and tools proposed in the training program. In the context of this research, we investigate the attitudes of Greek-French language teachers of Secondary and Primary Education regarding their response and the contextualization of foreign language lessons during the period of mandated distance education.

4. Research aim and research questions

The questions of the research are:

- 1) how did they organize the foreign language lesson during the distance education and which teaching techniques did they choose;
- 2) which tools of the WebEx educational platform they used;
- 3) to what extent did they use the educational platforms e-class & E-me education;
- 4) how did they evaluate the degree of development of students' language communicative and pragmatic skills? e) what do they consider to be the main obstacles in distance teaching of foreign language?

5. Materials and Methods

The sample consists of 20 permanent and contractual teachers of the French language who served in public schools of Secondary and Primary Education in the Prefecture of Thessaloniki between March 20 and May 20, 2023 and taught the French language during the pandemic period. The selection was done using the "simple" random sampling method to ensure equal probabilities for each member to be included in the sample. We used the interview as a research tool, in particular the semi-structured in-depth interview (Paraskevopoulos, 1999), so that the teachers in the sample could comfortably express their views and concerns about the research questions.

For these reasons, we chose the in-depth interview. With this, we would attempt to gather as much information as possible about the experiences, opinions, attitudes, and representations of the participants. In particular, we chose the semi-structured interview, as we sought to direct the interviewee on key issues but to allow the interviewee to develop their thoughts and opinions freely and in-depth. Thus, we designed a set of predetermined questions, but with flexibility in terms of their order, in terms of modifying their content according to the interviewee and in terms of adding questions and topics for discussion. During the interview, we chose to use mostly open-ended questions. The reasons that led us to switch to this choice are: open-ended questions allow respondents some degree of flexibility in their answers. Therefore, they can choose what they consider most appropriate.

Furthermore, we would have the opportunity through the answers to discover something that we might not have anticipated. This could provide greater depth to our investigation. In addition, we would have been able to offer stimuli, as well as to ask for clarification or more information from the teacher respondents. In addition, we designed opinion questions to explore their attitudes and perceptions of our specific research questions. Finally, we designed descriptive questions to elicit specific information from respondents related to specific characteristics and knowledge, such as gender, age, years of service, professional status (tenured/contractual), and education level. In presenting the findings of the survey, we stick to a qualitative analysis due to the small sample size.

5.1 Demographic data

A total of 20 permanent and contractual French language teachers working in the year 2022-23 in the public sector in schools of Secondary and Primary Education in the Prefecture of Thessaloniki participated in the survey. Of these, 17 (seventeen) are women and 3 (three) are men. These teachers taught the French language course at a distance during the period of the health crisis.

Table 1: Demographic data of participants

N	Gender	Age	Professional status	Years of service	Level of teaching
I1	Female	25-35	Contractual	0-5	Primary
I2	Female	45-55	Permanent	15-20	Primary
I3	Male	25-35	Contractual	0-5	Primary
I4	Female	35-45	Permanent	10-15	Secondary
I5	Female	35-45	Permanent	10-15	Secondary
I6	Female	35-45	Permanent	10-15	Secondary
I7	Male	25-35	Contractual	0-5	Primary
I8	Female	25-35	Contractual	0-5	Secondary
I9	Female	45-55	Permanent	15-20	Secondary
I10	Female	25-35	Contractual	0-5	Primary
I11	Female	55+	Permanent	20+	Secondary
I12	Female	35-45	Permanent	10-15	Primary
I13	Female	45-55	Permanent	20+	Secondary
I14	Female	35-45	Contractual	0-5	Primary
I15	Female	35-45	Contractual	0-5	Primary
I16	Female	25-35	Contractual	0-5	Secondary
I17	Male	45-55	Permanent	15-20	Secondary
I18	Female	45-55	Permanent	15-20	Primary
I19	Female	55+	Permanent	20+	Secondary
I20	Female	35-45	Contractual	0-5	Primary

The figures below show the professional status (permanent or contractual) of the teachers in the survey (11 permanent and 9 contractual French language teachers) in relation to gender.

Figure 2

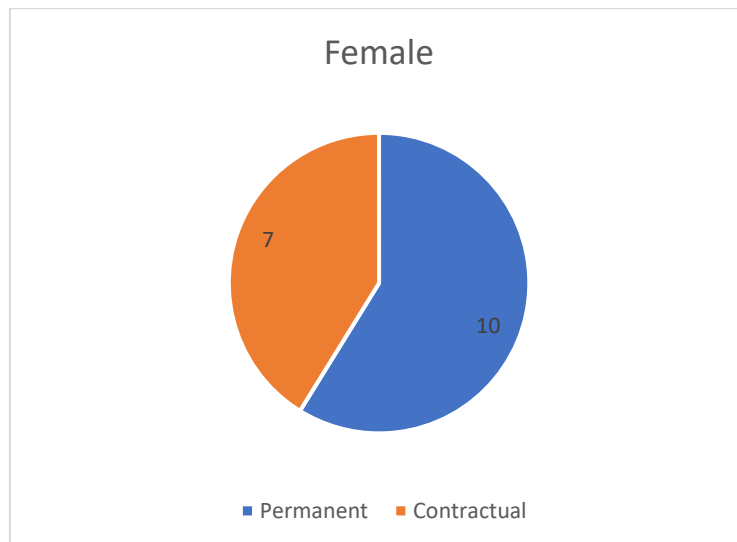
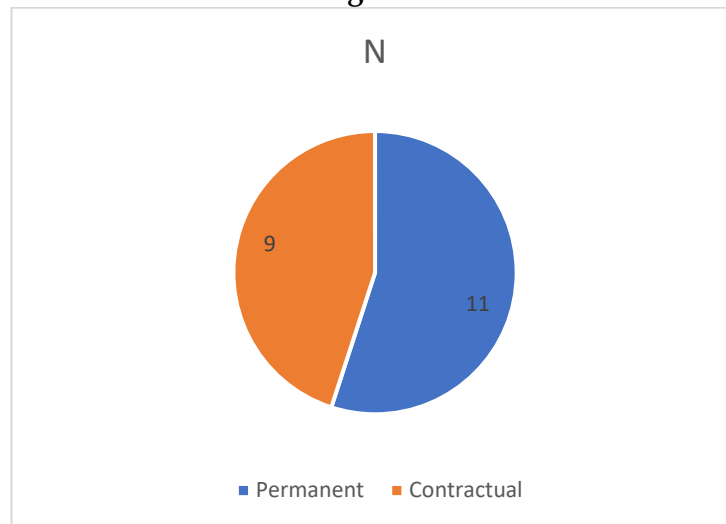


Figure 2^a

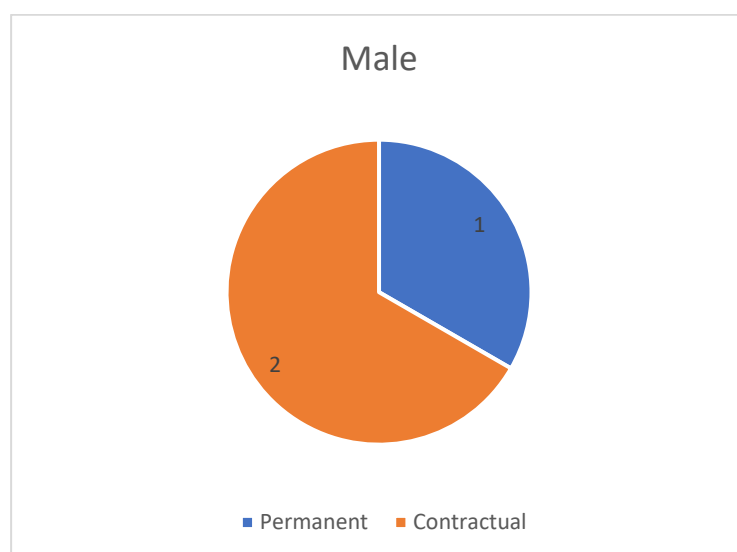


Figure 2^b

The figures below show the level of education (Primary or Secondary) of the teachers in the survey.

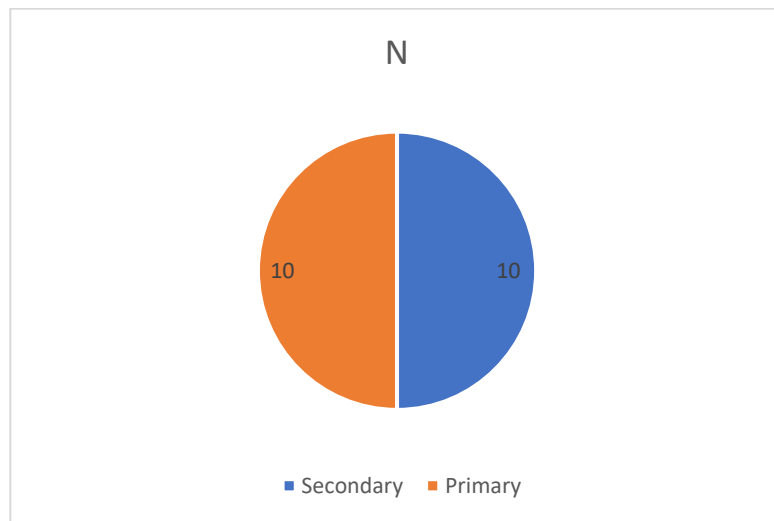


Figure 3: Level of teaching

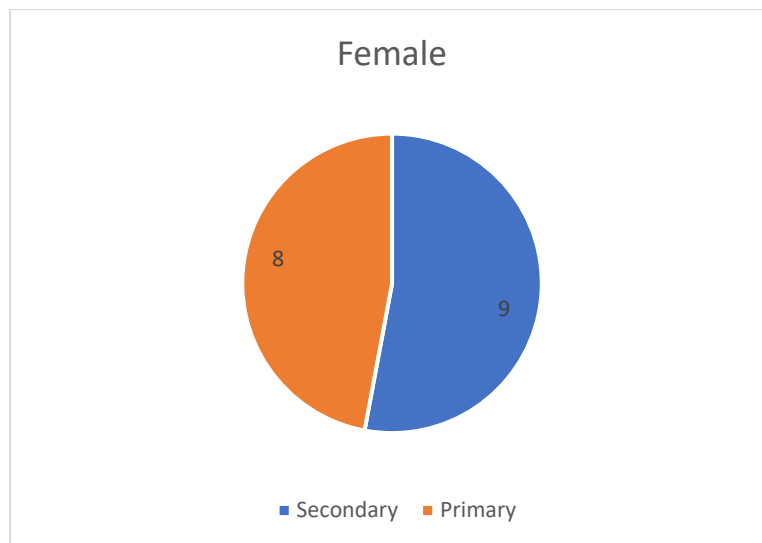


Figure 3^a

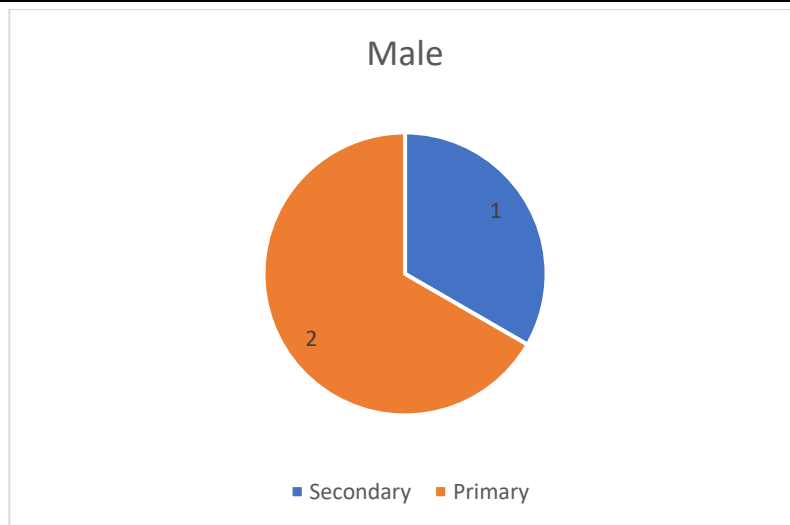


Figure 3^b

The figures below show the professional status (permanent or contractual) in relation to the level of education.

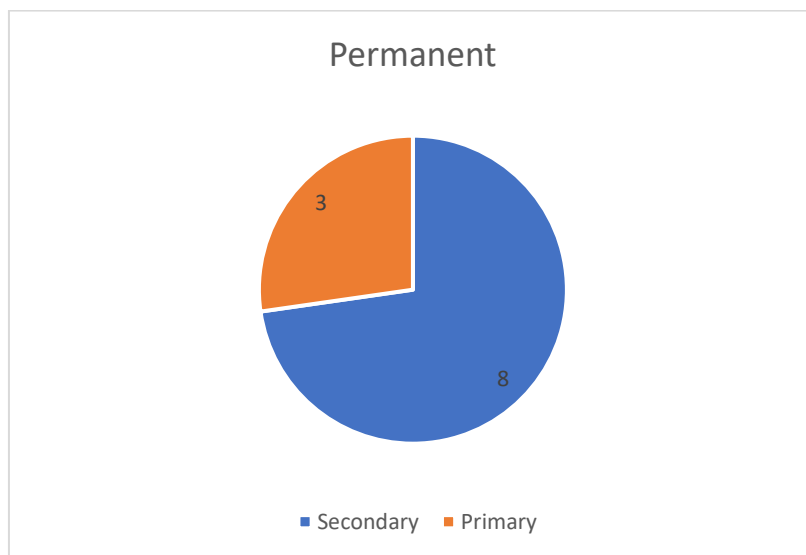


Figure 4^a

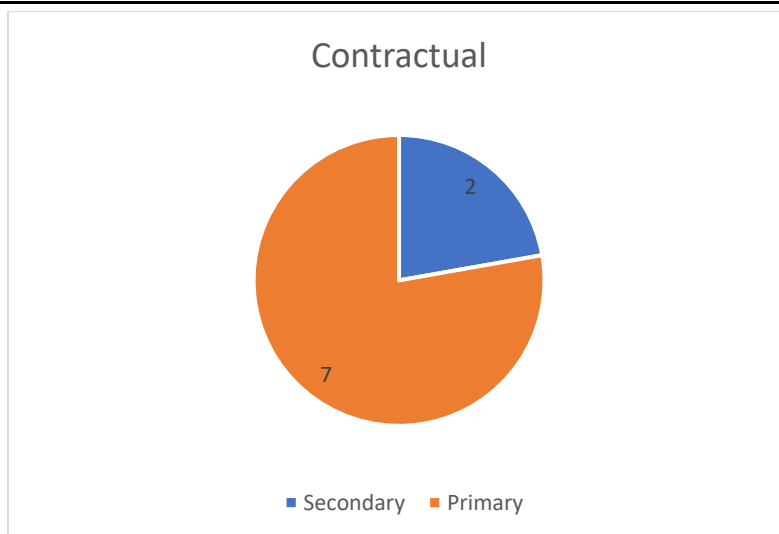
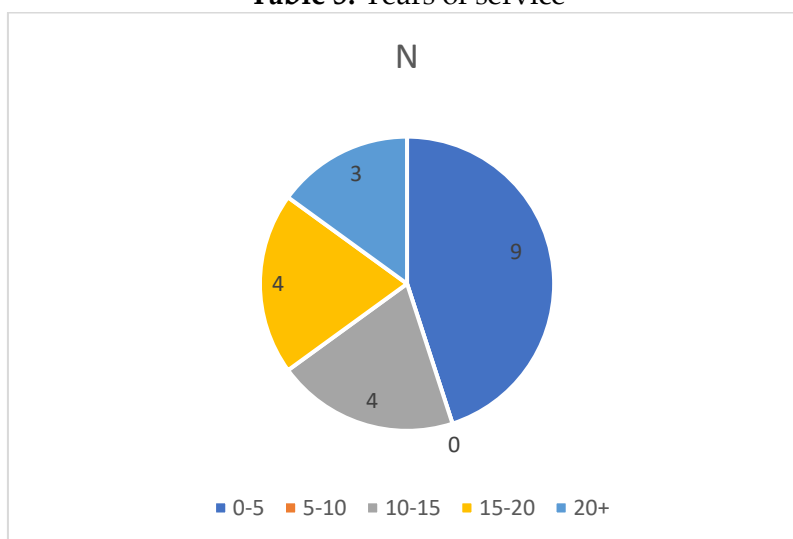


Figure 4^b

The figure below shows the years of service of the teachers in the sample.

Table 5: Years of service



4. Results

4.1 How did the teachers organize the foreign language (French) lesson during distance education and which teaching techniques did they choose?

This question examines the responses of the teachers interviewed in relation to their professional status (permanent or contractual), teaching level (primary or secondary education) and years of teaching service. It can be observed that the majority of the French language teachers in the sample, at the beginning of the compulsory distance learning period, felt quite inadequate and tried, without any substantial training support, to redesign their lessons and adapt them to distance learning. They sought help mainly in closed groups created on social media and found solutions and answers mainly in

networks of colleagues who were willing to share information and material and to collaborate in the context of the new difficult situation. Many teachers, especially those with many years of teaching experience, had no previous experience with online courses, pedagogical use of digital tools, or how to use online platforms and at the beginning, they faced many difficulties.

A permanent secondary school teacher with many years of teaching experience in secondary education (I13) reports: *"...we were asked by the Ministry to do distance learning without having any knowledge of how a course is organized on a platform. I had no previous similar experience, nor had I attended any training on this subject. I love learning in the classroom where I can look students in the eye. On the computer screen I felt awkward, the students had closed cameras. It was not a real class! I was trying to find materials to plan the lesson properly, but it wasn't easy. After I got a bit familiar, I showed them pictures and videos and we mostly discussed vocabulary»*. The same view seems to be shared by a permanent secondary school teacher (I9): *"...I tried to organize the lesson as best I could, I searched for materials on the internet and participated in teacher groups on social networking sites. At the beginning it was very difficult because I didn't know the digital platform. Slowly both I and the students became more familiar with it. As a teaching technique I used more the presentation of the material and then the vocabulary presentation. Something else, like writing, was very difficult. To organize the lesson, I was looking for material on websites or even in the digital book»*. On the other hand, primary school teachers with a few years of teaching experience claim that they tried to organize an interactive and fun lesson with the help of technology. A permanent primary teacher (I20) stresses: *"...the French lesson with young learners should be experiential and enjoyable. At the beginning of distance learning, I used to put on songs and videos, and we would all sing together. Then, by participating in teacher groups, I learned a lot of things and started to organize the lesson differently. I learned to make quizzes with questions, create interactive presentations, choose authentic resources, virtual museum tours, escape games, cloud computing and the lesson became more interesting for the students»*.

A similar experience is expressed by a permanent primary school teacher (I18): *"...it was impossible to follow the book, students did not want to participate, they had closed cameras and I had to find ways to motivate and encourage them to participate. So, I spent endless hours searching for materials appropriate for my classes and adapting them to the needs of my students. Teaching techniques that I use in face-to-face teaching, such as learning centers, for example, were impossible to transfer to distance learning"*. From the responses of the French language teachers interviewed, it is clear that teaching a living foreign language that requires interaction and oral expression is difficult to transfer to a communication platform without prior careful planning. There needs to be consistency in the structure, so as to motivate learning and participation, to include interactive material and authentic resources. The teaching techniques chosen by the teachers in the study are presentation, dialogue and supporting the lesson with digital tools (timelines, clouds, videos, songs), while some techniques such as Learning Stations were impossible to apply to distance learning. More difficulties were encountered by permanent secondary school teachers with many years of service. Something very important also emerges: the initial

uncertainty, anxiety, and ignorance of the principles of distance education were quickly and due to the circumstances overcome and teachers (permanent and contractual teachers) were able to work in the field of distance education.

4.2 Which tools of the WebEx educational platform were used by the teachers in the sample?

The platform proposed by the Ministry of Education for the modern sessions in distance education was the WebEx digital platform. This question examines teachers' responses according to their employment relationship (permanent or contractual) and education level (primary or secondary). Permanent secondary teachers with more than 20 years of teaching experience (I11) reported in this question: *"...at the beginning it was very difficult to use the online platform. I needed the help of the school director or my IT colleague to set up my own classroom and understand some basic functions, such as how to activate the camera, the sound, the screen sharing. At first, I didn't want to do screen sharing because I was afraid that it would create a technical error and shut down the room. Slowly I learned and that's all I did. I never shared students in rooms»*. A similar view is expressed by a permanent teacher with several years of teaching experience in primary education (I12): *"...the first lessons on the WebEx platform were a nightmare. I was very nervous, mainly because the students' parents were watching from home, and I felt that I was being assessed for my digital skills. The students had closed-circuit cameras, I felt like I was talking into a vacuum, and I was always anxious about doing something wrong. Of WebEx platform tools, I used chat, where I would write something, a good morning in French at the beginning of the lesson and ask students to write something and also, I always had my own camera and microphone on. I didn't use the possibility that the platform gives to divide students into groups in rooms to work in groups, because when I tried it once, there was a problem with the connection of some students who were connected from their mobile phones and couldn't access the rooms, so I abandoned that idea»*.

A contractual secondary teacher with a few years of teaching experience (I16) reports on the WebEx platform tools she used during her distance learning: *"...I had previously attended a MOOC on teaching French using the inverted classroom method. It was a methodology that I found fascinating, so when the distance learning started, I used the material from the seminar I attended and knew both the principles of distance learning and the stages of the inverted classroom. I always did screen sharing and used the white board many times, where I wrote in different colors to highlight vocabulary or concepts in the lesson. I tried sharing in rooms, but it wasn't very easy because of limited teaching time»*. The same opinion seems to be shared by a contractual primary teacher with a few years of teaching experience (I14): *"...last year I taught Spanish online and a teacher very knowledgeable in new technologies and also in designing lessons through platforms. This helped me a lot because I had no other formal training experience. I imitated my own teacher's example: I was putting links in the chat, sharing videos and then I learned to create my own pedagogical material, creating online quizzes, adding questions to videos, creating interactive images of monuments in Paris or other French cities. Several times I used polling, and it was a lot of fun»*. Interpreting the responses of the teachers in the sample, it appears that teachers with many years of teaching experience at both

levels did not make much use of the tools of the digital environment available to them during the period of compulsory distance learning. The stress of conducting the lesson was the dominant factor and did not allow the use of additional functionalities of the platform. These teachers chose to enable the chat and screen-sharing features. In contrast, younger teachers at both levels utilized additional features such as polling, e-quizzes, and whiteboards. Finally, it emerges that teachers regardless of grade level or years of teaching experience avoided using the screen-sharing feature in rooms either because of poor student connectivity or limited teaching time.

4.3 To what extent did they make use of the e-class & E-me education platforms?

Along with the WebEx platform for synchronous sessions, the document with the instructions of the Ministry of Education (no. F8/38091/Δ4/16-3-2020) made available to teachers and for the needs of distance education the e-class and E-me education platforms for asynchronous study of the material. These platforms already existed, and teachers were asked to create their own classrooms for depositing teaching material and asynchronous communication with students. The sample teachers' responses were interpreted by grade level and years of teaching experience and interesting conclusions emerged. Permanent secondary school teacher with several years of experience (I5) supports: *"...when suddenly the schools closed, we were all in a panic. The headmaster of the school proposed the e-class platform and asked us to set up classrooms for asynchronous communication. I started learning how this communication platform works and uploading material. We hardly used the forum because the students were not willing to participate. I was uploading links and material I found on the internet. Of course, I was helped a lot by the closed groups of teachers on social media, so I was able to improve my digital skills given that I had no previous experience"*.

A similar view is expressed by a permanent teacher with over 20 years of teaching experience (I19): *"...I was not aware of the e-class platform at all and in our school, it was suggested because the principal thought it was more suitable for high school students. I created my classroom, but I was never sure about the asynchronous participation of students in the classroom. We communicated in synchronous class and if there was a need via email. We barely utilized asynchronous communication. My assignments were sent to me by mails, and I think they avoided connecting to the asynchronous class. One student told me it was uninteresting and had no life. It was a big blow to the kids to have distance learning that lasted so long"*. On the other hand, primary school teachers said that asynchronous communication worked perhaps because of parental intervention. In primary education, the E-me education platform was most used. A permanent primary teacher (I7) claims: *"...although I was not aware of the platform proposed by the Ministry, I quickly activated my class and became familiar with it. I had attended a distance training course and borrowed many of the ideas from my trainer. I activated the communication wall and each day I left a small message for the students, a positive thought. I wanted them to come to class happy and find a message for them. A simple word in French «bonjour», «comment ça va», was important to keep them motivated and responsive. I also made use of many tools on the platform, such as creating gap-filling activities, matching, multiple choice,*

quizzes, linking a picture to a title, etc. Despite technical problems at the beginning, after that, it went well. What I found difficult was the assignment because the students were not responsive, they preferred to mail me the assignments without feeling the time pressure».

A permanent primary teacher (I2) expresses a positive opinion about the E-me education platform: *"...at the beginning the platform had a lot of technical problems, but after a while it was upgraded and worked better. The E-me education platform is more enriched than the e-class and gives more possibilities to interact with students. I used the communication wall for discussion a lot. I posted a picture related to our topic and asked them to leave a comment or they too could post a picture with a title. Inside the classroom, I incorporated my own blog, and this created a team environment, students did not feel isolated during the difficult time of Covid. It also gave me the ability to create content, drag and drop, dialogue cards, true-false questions, timeline, find the words, guess the answer, audio recorder, all of which were very important to me and the course. I remember staying up late to complete an activity".* Interpreting the teachers' responses, we find that there was a different degree of acceptance regarding the two proposed platforms. On the one hand, e-class was considered more suitable for Secondary Education, but it was static and not conducive to communication and interaction; on the other hand, E-me education seemed to satisfy the teachers and was considered suitable for Primary Education. Teachers with long teaching experience found their students' response to the asynchronous classroom unsatisfactory, although younger teachers activated many functions of the asynchronous platform, creating interactive material and thus promoting communication and collaboration in distance learning conditions.

4.4 How was the degree of development of students' linguistic communicative and pragmatic skills assessed?

This question attempts to answer the question of the assessment of students' language/communication and pragmatic skills during distance learning. The Common Curriculum for Foreign Languages (2016) and the New Curriculum for Foreign Languages (2021) propose alternative assessment techniques, such as self-assessment, rubrics, portfolios, and assessment with concept maps, in addition to the traditional oral and written examinations based on tests of comprehension and production of mainly written language. Permanent secondary school teacher (I4) observes: *"...during the period of distance learning, what was important was to maintain communication with students. As teachers, we had a consultative role and we wanted to protect students by creating a context of safety and encouragement. Personally, I did not focus heavily on rigorous assessment of language skills, but on ongoing communication. I used interactive quizzes and games with various self-assessment apps, gave them online dictionaries to look up vocabulary, asked them to make a virtual hotel room reservation, and thought it was perhaps the right opportunity to free both students and teachers from the stress of quantitative assessment».* A similar observation was made by a contractual primary teacher (I1): *"...our primary concern was to encourage the students. In primary school, children needed to vent, to express their feelings, so contact with the teacher gave them this opportunity. I didn't want to create a climate of pressure and anxiety, so I preferred*

playful assessment. I gave them quizzes, used apps like Kahoot for group and interactive assessment and the students were happy to participate. The conditions were very difficult, and I didn't want to discourage or pressure them. The written test causes panic, besides through the platform is not ideal to do. Let's look at this period as a period of revision of traditional assessment. Maybe eventually with self-assessment, students will finally understand that knowledge, and therefore assessment, is their own business and not their teacher's". With regard to the question of skills assessment in French, very important conclusions emerge: French teachers - at least those in the sample - eschewed traditional written examinations and appreciated the role of self-assessment. It is very important in language courses to emphasize the assessment of linguistic as well as pragmatic skills through self-assessment or other techniques of authentic assessment. Authentic teaching can only be followed by authentic assessment and distance teaching can create a favorable context for developing the alternative way of assessing skills.

4.5 What do you consider to be the main obstacles in distance learning of a foreign language?

This question sheds light on the difficulties encountered by the teachers in the sample when implementing distance teaching. Among the most important obstacles were the lack of immediacy and interaction between teachers and students, the difficulty of using teaching techniques that are utilized in physical teaching, the feeling of addressing an empty classroom, and the many technical problems. Permanent secondary school teacher (I5) reports: *"...I would start the lesson and I couldn't feel the joy of the class, the laughter, the teasing, the shouting. I was in front of the screen and saw closed cameras. There was no real communication, at least at first. Then we got used to it, although I think there's no comparison to physical presence. Also, many students who lived in vulnerable environments didn't have access to the internet and couldn't connect, in many cases, they didn't have a computer or were using a mobile phone but had no connection data. They were in a very difficult position, and I was trying to solve their problems first and then mine which were also many. I was looking for ways to make the course engaging in a cold and distant environment, that was the real challenge for me".* Contractual teacher of Secondary Education (I8) stresses: *"...the technical problems were many and there was neither technical support nor any training. We learnt on our own how to operate the platforms and organize our lessons. We learned how to create materials, how to adapt them to the needs of our classroom and to the needs of distance learning. The training from the Ministry came much later when we had learned everything. Another difficulty was the lack of a sense of school. Tele-education is not a school, nor is the platform a classroom. It was well used in the pandemic emergency, but it is not the solution for everything. Also, the asynchronous tracking was zero. There was no interest».*

A permanent primary teacher (I3) reports on the difficulties she faced: *"...I made a lot of effort to motivate students to participate. Especially in foreign language lesson, participation, dialogue, oral expression are very important elements. The students did not participate, as in the classroom. They turned off the cameras and did not speak. It was the loneliness of the teacher in front of black screens. Also, no one educated us, everyone was trying on their own and luckily*

groups were created on social networks and there was mutual help. Another difficulty was asynchronous communication. Students were not motivated on the platform away from their classroom. And of course, many families faced a huge problem with equipment they didn't have. At my school, the principal was very helpful to these families so that the children did not feel socially isolated. School is a place of joy; tele-education is cold and boring. For other purposes and in another context, why not? But to young primary school pupils it is destructive". The qualitative analysis of the sample teachers' responses shows that the difficulties are mainly related to the absence of a school climate, equipment and logistics, and the absence of training on distance learning.

5. Discussion

The discussion that follows is articulated around the five (5) research questions that were posed: a) How did the teachers organize their foreign language (French) lessons during distance education and what teaching techniques did they choose: the research showed that the teachers of the sample, at least at the beginning of the compulsory distance education, had difficulties in organizing their lessons and sought help either from colleagues or on the internet. The teaching techniques they chose were interactive presentations, web exploration, discussion, and they stressed that techniques that can be applied in the classroom, such as the Learning Centers proposed for differentiation of teaching and inclusion, cannot be applied for practical reasons in distance learning, thus reducing the liveliness and interest in the lesson. This finding is also confirmed in research by Psyllas (2021). It is reported that teachers during distance teaching mainly used power point presentations, projected videos, which were then posted in the asynchronous communication classroom. Similar findings were also reached by Tarchi *et al.*, (2022) in the international context. Regarding the 2nd research question related to the tools of the WebEx platform used in distance education: teachers used more screen sharing, chat, whiteboard, and stated that they avoided dividing students into groups in the platform rooms. These findings are confirmed by research by Psyllas (2021), according to which screen sharing and chat were the tools most used by teachers: teachers seemed to use it in every lesson. Through this tool they could show their online class some digital presentation they had created, exercises, the digital book, a video they had made or found in internet, in general any kind of support material that would help the progress of the lesson and attract the interest of the students (Psyllas, 2021). The 3rd research question concerned the extent to which the asynchronous tele-education platforms (e-class & E-me education) were used. In this question it seems that e-class is chosen more by secondary school teachers, while E-me education is considered more playful and is chosen by primary school teachers. For teachers, asynchronous communication through the platforms did not work to the extent they would have liked, and the tools they used most were the wall and content creation with the tools included in the platform. Literature shows that asynchronous communication platforms allow for personal and group messaging, have a discussion area where questions can be resolved

as a group, and in general it is preferable to have a stable communication environment between teachers and students, rather than this communication being done through email exchange (Psyllas, 2021). The 4th research question is related to the assessment of linguistic and pragmatic skills in French, it emerged that teachers, due to the circumstances, avoided traditional written examinations and preferred alternative practices by promoting self-assessment with electronic quizzes, polling, games for group assessment or heteroassessment. This finding is important as it reflects a shift, in the context of distance education, from traditional forms of numerical assessment to authentic and alternative practices that put the learner at the center (Varsamidou, 2024; Ardiansyahmiraja, *et al.*, 2021; Özüdoğru, 2021). Finally, the last question related to the difficulties and barriers during tele-education, teachers mentioned technical support, the logistical infrastructure needed, lack of motivation on the part of students, non-participation in asynchronous platforms, the need for training, and the management of the online classroom. A very key issue was the social isolation of students from vulnerable backgrounds, as the social dimension of the real classroom is lost, and these students are marginalized. The same conclusions are reached by research by Verulava *et al.*, (2023), who report that pointed out a number of shortcomings, such as limited communication, technical access difficulties, low quality and dysfunctional internet access, uncomfortable environment, student participation process and complex social relations. The crisis caused by the COVID-19 epidemic identified the need to promote high-quality methods of acquiring knowledge. It is preferable to equip university lecture halls with the necessary technical facilities and to develop curricula that allow students to decide whether to attend lectures in the classroom or participate online.

6. Suggestions for Future Research

This small-scale qualitative research captures the views of Greek-French language teachers on the issue of distance teaching of a foreign language (French). It concerned a small sample (20 persons) of French language teachers of Primary and Secondary Education, both permanent and contractual teachers. As the issue of teaching and assessment of foreign language teaching and assessment in distance education is very important and concerns all teacher disciplines, it is proposed to carry out a quantitative survey of a large sample of teachers of all disciplines in order to record a wide range of teachers' views. In the teaching scenarios of the New Curricula for Foreign Languages (2021), it is stated that many of the proposed activities can be transferred to distance learning environments and can be either synchronous or asynchronous, so it is necessary to study teachers' attitudes in this regard (designing activities for distance learning, role of the inverted classroom model, scenario planning models, digital tools, e-assessment, benefits and difficulties of distance learning, training, role of school counsellors, implementation of teaching scenarios in the New Curricula).

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, a summary of the main findings arising from the analysis of the research findings is attempted. The French language teachers in the sample consider that the organization of lessons on modern communication platforms is challenging and must be governed by certain principles. They adapted to the tele-education data through their own efforts or through a network of colleagues, as the institutionalized training of the Ministry of Education was delayed. The teaching techniques they used were mostly presentations enriched with video or interactive material (quizzes, games, websites). Differentiation techniques were very difficult to implement. The WebEx tools most used were screen sharing and chat boxes, while break-out rooms were used less or not at all. Also, the whiteboard with annotations feature was utilized when teaching French. Participation in the asynchronous communication platforms was not as expected, as students preferred other modes of communication (for example, email). Students' linguistic and pragmatic improvement was mainly assessed through quizzes or group games, and this is really valuable for the necessary shift to alternative forms of assessment. Finally, significant problems and difficulties were recorded, particularly in relation to the logistical infrastructure of pupils from vulnerable backgrounds, as there is a risk of marginalization and isolation. There is also an urgent need for a training program on the principles of distance learning in foreign language teaching. Teachers were able to cope with the demanding conditions during the pandemic thanks to their personal work and training. They also stress the importance of classroom-based learning and the school climate. The computer screen cannot replace physical teaching, nor can communication platforms replace the unique student-teacher relationship.

Restrictions

This research paper is a small-scale study due to the small sample size. Therefore, it is suggested that a larger sample of the number of teachers be explored in order to arrive at firm conclusions and to conduct a new research study.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the colleagues who agreed to participate in the research, as well as the school principals who facilitated the interviews.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Athina Varsamidou holds a Doctorate in Pedagogy from the University of Crete in Greece, Department of Pedagogy and a Master 2 in "Evaluation and Administration in Education" from Rhodes University and a Master 2 in "Science in Education" from the Hellenic Open University. From 2002 to 2020, she was a teacher of French as a Foreign

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Athina Varsamidou
ATTITUDES OF GREEK FRENCH LANGUAGE TEACHERS ON
THE DISTANCE TEACHING OF FRENCH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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