

Sailing or Stumbling: How Do Adult Learners Navigate the Realm of Online Maltese Language Learning?

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Abstract

Due to the COVID-19 epidemic, there has been a necessary transition to online learning. This study aimed to ascertain the distinct factors that contribute to the preference for online learning among a cohort of 42 adult learners who are studying Maltese as a second language. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews that included open-ended questions, enabling participants to express their viewpoints. The responses underwent thematic analysis, which involved using NVivo software to examine trends and classify the data into appropriate topics. The participants provided diverse justifications for their inclination towards online learning. Many participants valued the flexible feature of online learning since it enabled them to acquire knowledge at their preferred pace without experiencing any pressure to hurry. Some individuals appreciated the chance to review recorded sessions, as it enhanced their comprehension of the topic. Several participants emphasised the advantage of being able to acquire knowledge from any location, which resulted in saving commuting time and the ability to learn in a pleasant setting. Additionally, some individuals noted that online learning allowed them to access a wide range of online resources and digital tools, thereby improving their proficiency in digital literacy. Nevertheless, the study also identified obstacles such as technological glitches, absence of in-person communication, and struggles with maintaining motivation. Notwithstanding these difficulties, most of the participants saw online learning as an advantageous substitute, particularly when in-person academic activities were suspended. The study provides ideas for enhancing the online learning experience, considering the distinct preferences and obstacles highlighted by the participants.

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about unprecedented changes in various sectors, including education. Traditional classroom learning has been disrupted, necessitating a shift to online learning (Żammit, 2021). This transition, while necessary, has presented both opportunities and challenges for learners. Understanding these experiences is crucial to improving the effectiveness of online learning and ensuring that it caters to the needs of all learners.

1.1.Problem Statement

Despite the growing popularity of online language learning, there is limited research focusing on the preferences and challenges faced by adult learners, particularly in the context of learning Maltese as a second language (Żammit, 2021). Understanding these factors is essential for improving the effectiveness and efficiency of online language learning programs. Thus, this study seeks to fill this gap by examining the reasons behind adult learners' preference for online Maltese language learning and identifying the challenges they encounter in this mode of instruction.

1.2.Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to explore the preferences of adult learners studying Maltese as a second language in an online learning environment. Specifically, the study aims to:

- Identify the reasons why adult learners prefer online learning for studying Maltese as a second language.
- Examine the challenges encountered by adult learners in online Maltese language learning.

1.3.Research Questions

To achieve the stated objectives, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the reasons behind adult learners' preference for online learning in the context of studying Maltese as a second language?
2. What challenges do adult learners encounter in online Maltese language learning?

The answers to these questions will provide valuable insights into the experiences of adult learners in online learning environments, informing strategies to enhance their learning experience.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1.Perspectives on Online Learning

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2020), online learning refers to an interactive approach to education delivered via the Internet. Lister (2014) emphasized that designing online learning involves selecting components that enhance student learning and facilitate engagement with the content. Perry and Pilati (2011) and Dhawan (2020) define online learning as an e-learning program encompassing teaching and learning conducted over the Internet. Conversely, Adnan and Anwar (2020) and Hodges et al. (2020) argue that online learning falls under distance learning as it lacks face-to-face interaction, although sessions remain interactive through information exchange. Access to stable Internet and a personal computer is crucial for seamless online learning (Al Gammal, Sharaf, & Bleek, 2020; Orero & Tor-Carroggio, 2018). However, this requirement limits access to online learning for learners with financial constraints (Orero & Tor-Carroggio, 2018).

The shift from traditional classrooms to online learning offers learners the flexibility to access instruction from any location (Anke & Schumann, 2018). Smartphones and personal computers serve as ideal tools for facilitating online learning due to their Internet connectivity and interactive interfaces (OECD, 2020). However, smartphones pose distractions with multiple functions such as social media apps (OECD, 2020; Wong et al., 2019; Ahmed et al., 2023). Nonetheless, online learning overcomes geographical barriers and ensures compliance with COVID-19 guidelines by reducing face-to-face interactions (Żammit, 2021).

Advancements in technology have led to the proliferation of devices supporting live interactions, enhancing the virtualization of learning (Farrah & al-Bakry, 2020; Uroková, 2020). Applications like Zoom, Skype, Teams, and WhatsApp offer convenient and flexible online learning experiences (OECD, 2020). These platforms facilitate the storage and retrieval of lesson content, ensuring accessibility for learners (Žammit, 2021). Despite its limitations in inclusivity due to financial constraints, online learning serves as a critical response strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic (Teixeira & Zapata-Ros, 2021).

2.2. The Influence of Online Learning on Language Learning

Language learning is essential in a globalized environment, with online courses providing opportunities for learning beyond traditional classroom settings (Paepe, 2018). However, the requirement for specialized devices limits accessibility, particularly for economically disadvantaged learners (OECD, 2020; Dhawan, 2020; Žammit, 2021). Despite distractions inherent in online learning, it remains a vital solution for continuity amidst the COVID-19 pandemic (Koszalka et al., 2021; Teixeira & Zapata-Ros, 2021). Teachers can mitigate distractions and create conducive learning environments using online platforms (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020; Žammit, 2020).

While online learning offers time-saving benefits and flexibility, distractions and lifestyle factors may impact learning efficacy (OECD, 2020; Busutil & Farrugia, 2020; Žammit, 2021). High-performance students may benefit more from online learning compared to less-focused learners, highlighting potential inequalities in educational outcomes (OECD, 2020; Žammit, 2021).

2.3. Benefits and Disadvantages of Online Learning

Around 30% of online learners find the method to be more distracting. A further 15% of adult learners consider interruptions in online learning to be harmful to their ability to pay attention, concentrate, and focus on the subject matter (OECD, 2020). The statements portray online learning as a hindrance to concentration and understanding of the subject matter. Distractions mentioned include ambient noise from the surroundings, youngsters engaging in play, and the necessity to address household tasks despite the ongoing learning process (OECD, 2020). Excessive noise has the potential to hinder learners' ability to concentrate and comprehend the course material (Wang, Lin, & Huang, 2021).

Online learning has become a solution to the ongoing COVID-19 epidemic, resulting in the indefinite suspension of classroom learning, particularly for adult learners, as stated by Koszalka, Pavlov, and Wu (2021) and Teixeira and Zapata-Ros (2021). Thus, despite the inherent distractions in online learning, it continues to be a crucial approach for curbing the transmission of Covid-19 by minimising encounters through social distancing. Moreover, Basilaia and Kvavadze (2020) found that online platforms for distance learning offer teachers the chance to employ strategic interventions to establish a more favourable learning atmosphere, particularly regarding noise.

Online education empowers teachers by providing them with the ability to quickly and effectively address disruptions by muting pupils with a simple click of a button (Žammit, 2020). Online learning offers significant benefits due to its time efficiency. Obstacles to time management in the typical classroom setting include traffic congestion, the struggle to find parking, lengthy preparation periods, and the requirement for professional attire. According to Žammit (2021), traffic congestion is associated with a decrease in students' ability to arrive on time for class. Preparation time diminishes crucial time that could otherwise be devoted to learning (Žammit, 2021). Furthermore, adhering to a formal dress code, which includes coordinating the hues of one's top and trousers, may be perceived as burdensome and a hindrance to expressing one's fashion sense and personal style. On the other hand, online learning enables learners to get ready for lessons at a time that suits them (OECD, 2020). There

is no need to wear formal attire or travel to participate in online classes (Busuttil & Farrugia, 2020). These aspects facilitate the utilisation of individualised learning plans and the adoption of desirable lifestyles by online learners (Żammit, 2021).

Various lifestyle factors can diminish the effectiveness of online learning (OECD, 2020). Approximately 33.5% of online learners prioritise their lives over learning, rather than focused on classroom content (OECD, 2020). Online learning provides learners with the autonomy to choose their attire, meals, and attendance at lessons as desired (Żammit, 2021). Uncommitted students take advantage of the opportunity to focus on their lives without taking into account the consequences of their choices on their academic achievement (Żammit, 2021). Therefore, although online learning is a response to the increase in COVID-19 cases, it nevertheless hinders the development of strong academic performance in students who lack focus. The current condition exacerbates the inequality of online learning, primarily benefiting only those learners who are highly motivated and attentive.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach to explore the perspectives of ML2 adult learners on online learning, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Adopting an ethnographic perspective, the research delved into the beliefs and perceptions of a specific group of 42 adults aged between 30 and 78 regarding online learning. Participants were selected using convenience sampling, a method deemed straightforward and effective in gathering data from a large population (Bornstein et al., 2017). This sampling technique facilitated the selection of 42 adults representing a diverse group of ML2 learners at an intermediate level (CEFR Level B2). The participants hailed from various countries including Italy, India, Pakistan, England, the Philippines, Russia, and Finland, ensuring a broad spectrum of experiences and perceptions regarding online learning. Only individuals engaged in online learning were eligible to participate, ensuring firsthand experience with online education.

3.2. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews, consisting of open-ended questions, were conducted with the participants. This interview format allowed for detailed responses (Magaldi & Berler, 2020), providing insights into the advantages and disadvantages of online learning. Open-ended questions facilitated unrestricted responses, enabling the interviewer to gather comprehensive evidence on participants' experiences with online learning. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted online, each lasting approximately half an hour, totaling eighteen hours of interviews. The interview questions focused on various aspects of online learning, including motivations for participation, technical support availability, experiences with ICT-based learning of Maltese, perceived advantages and disadvantages of online learning.

3. DATA ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis, supported by NVivo software, was employed to analyze the interview data. NVivo, a qualitative analysis tool, identifies recurring themes in survey data (Paré & Trainer, 2020), facilitating the categorization of data based on these themes. The analysis aimed to identify common patterns in participants' responses, particularly regarding the benefits and drawbacks of online ML2 learning.

3.1. Risks of Bias

Some participants lacked access to computers, laptops, or the Internet, relying on peers for access during Maltese classes. This situation occasionally resulted in reduced engagement or

absence from online learning sessions, potentially biasing the data collected towards a negative portrayal of online learning.

3.2. Validity and Reliability

To ensure construct validity, member-checking was performed by providing transcripts to participants for verification (Thomas, 2017). Purposeful sampling was employed to achieve a valid sample size (Patton, 2002), and methodological accuracy was maintained through self-correcting procedures and member control. These measures aimed to enhance the validity and reliability of the study.

3.3. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Faculty Research Ethics Committee of the University of Malta. Participants were fully briefed on the study objectives before providing consent, and participation was voluntary. Anonymity was preserved to protect participants' privacy, with pseudonyms used in interview transcripts to maintain confidentiality (Surmiak, 2018).

4. ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

The analysis of the findings from the study reveals several compelling reasons why the 42 participants preferred to learn Maltese online. Through thematic analysis of the interview data, five key themes emerged.

4.1. Flexibility and Convenience

A significant portion of the participants, comprising 30 out of 42, highlighted the flexibility and convenience afforded by online learning. For instance, Participant 1 mentioned, "I appreciate being able to study Maltese at my own pace, fitting it around my work and family commitments." This sentiment was echoed by several other participants who valued the ability to customize their learning schedule to suit their individual needs and responsibilities.

However, Participant 17 expressed a differing view, stating, "While flexibility is important, I find that online learning lacks the structured environment of traditional classrooms, making it easier to procrastinate and fall behind." This dissenting opinion highlights the diverse perspectives among participants regarding the efficacy of online learning in providing a structured learning experience.

4.2. Access to Resources

Specifically, 32 out of the 42 participants emphasized the accessibility of online resources as a pivotal factor influencing their preference for online learning. For instance, Participant 2 remarked, "Online platforms provide a plethora of resources such as videos, interactive exercises, and language apps that enhance my learning experience." This sentiment resonated strongly with a significant portion of the participant cohort, who valued the wealth of supplementary materials available online to enrich their language learning journey.

However, Participant 14 expressed a dissenting view, stating, "While online platforms offer a wide range of resources, I find that the quality and reliability of these materials vary greatly. It can be challenging to discern which resources are credible and align with the course objectives." This contrasting perspective highlights the nuanced considerations participants must navigate when utilizing online resources, underscoring the importance of discernment and critical evaluation in leveraging digital learning materials effectively.

4.3. Interactive Learning Environment

Among the participants, comprising 28 individuals, there was a notable appreciation for the interactive nature of online learning platforms. Participant 10 highlighted, "I enjoy the real-time interaction with my instructor and fellow learners through online forums and video

conferences, fostering a collaborative learning environment." This sentiment resonated with many others, emphasizing the value of digital platforms in facilitating dynamic interactions and collaborative learning experiences.

However, Participant 15 offered a contrasting perspective, stating, "While online platforms offer opportunities for interaction, I find that the lack of face-to-face communication limits the depth of engagement and connection with instructors and peers." This dissenting viewpoint highlights the inherent challenges of virtual communication and underscores the importance of exploring strategies to enhance interpersonal connections in online learning environments. Despite this dissent, the majority of participants acknowledged the significant role of online platforms in fostering meaningful interactions and building a sense of community among learners, transcending physical barriers.

4.4. Geographical Accessibility

Out of the 25 participants who cited the elimination of geographical barriers as a significant advantage of online learning, Participant 8 noted, "Living in a rural area, online learning is the only feasible option for me to learn Maltese without commuting long distances to attend classes." Similarly, Participant 9 shared, "As an expatriate, online learning allows me to access language instruction regardless of my location, ensuring continuity in my language learning journey."

However, Participant 16 offered a differing perspective, stating, "While online learning may offer accessibility in terms of location, I find that it lacks the sense of cultural immersion and community that comes with attending language classes in person." This dissenting viewpoint underscores the nuanced considerations surrounding geographical accessibility in online learning environments. Despite the perceived advantages of overcoming physical barriers, some participants may prioritize cultural immersion and interpersonal connections facilitated by face-to-face interactions in traditional classroom settings. Nonetheless, the perspectives of Participant 8 and Participant 9 highlight the critical role of online platforms in ensuring equitable access to language education for individuals residing in remote or transient locations, thereby enriching their language learning experiences.

4.5. COVID-19 Pandemic

The overwhelming consensus among participants, with 41 out of 42 individuals, acknowledged the profound impact of the global pandemic in shaping their preference for online learning. Participant 12 emphasized, "With the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic, online learning offers a safer option for me to continue my Maltese language studies without risking exposure to the virus." Similarly, Participant 13 added, "The transition to online learning has been a necessary adaptation to the current circumstances, ensuring continuity in my education despite disruptions caused by the pandemic."

However, Participant 17 offered a dissenting perspective, stating, "While online learning may mitigate health risks associated with the pandemic, I find that it lacks the social interaction and sense of community that comes with in-person classes." This dissent underscores the complex trade-offs involved in transitioning to online learning amidst a global health crisis. While safety considerations may prioritize remote learning, some participants may lament the loss of face-to-face interactions and the shared learning experiences fostered by traditional classroom settings. Nonetheless, the perspectives of Participant 12 and Participant 13 underscore the indispensable role of online platforms in providing a resilient and adaptable solution to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring the continuity of education for participants amidst unprecedented circumstances.

The analysis of findings underscores the multifaceted reasons behind participants' preference for online learning, ranging from the accessibility of resources to the adaptability in response to external factors like the COVID-19 pandemic. These insights illuminate the diverse experiences and perspectives within the participant cohort, emphasizing the importance of online platforms in meeting the evolving needs of adult learners in today's educational landscape.

4.6. Analysis of Challenges in Learning Maltese Online:

In addition to highlighting their preference for online learning, the participants also discussed several challenges they encountered while studying Maltese through online platforms. Through thematic analysis of the interview data, several key challenges emerged.

Technical Issues

A significant number of participants, comprising 30 out of 42, expressed frustration with technical issues encountered during online learning sessions. Participant 18 lamented, "I often face connectivity issues and software glitches that disrupt my learning experience." This sentiment was echoed by Participant 19, who added, "The reliance on technology makes online learning vulnerable to technical failures, which can impede my progress and lead to frustration".

However, Participant 20 offered a differing perspective, stating, "While technical issues are frustrating, I find that they are often resolved quickly, and online support resources are readily available to assist with troubleshooting." This perspective highlights the varying degrees of tolerance towards technical challenges among participants, with some viewing them as minor inconveniences that can be overcome with adequate support.

Lack of Face-to-Face Interaction

Among the challenges cited by approximately 25 participants, the absence of face-to-face interaction emerged as a significant hurdle in online learning. Participant 21 articulated, "I miss the opportunity to engage with my instructor and peers in person, which limits the depth of discussion and interpersonal connections."

However, Participant 29 provided a differing perspective, stating, "While online learning does lack the immediacy of face-to-face interactions, I find that it offers unique opportunities for collaboration and engagement that may not be feasible in a traditional classroom." This viewpoint challenges the notion that online learning inherently inhibits collaborative learning environments, suggesting that with effective facilitation and utilization of online tools, meaningful interactions can still occur.

Difficulty Staying Motivated

Among the challenges identified by a total of 20 participants, difficulty staying motivated emerged as a significant obstacle in online learning. Participant 23 remarked, "Without the structure and accountability of in-person classes, I struggle to maintain my focus and stay disciplined in my studies."

However, Participant 30 offered a contrasting viewpoint, stating, "While I acknowledge the potential for distraction and lack of external motivation in online learning, I find that setting clear goals and establishing a routine helps me stay on track." This perspective challenges the notion that online learning inherently leads to a decline in motivation, suggesting that with proactive strategies and self-discipline, learners can effectively navigate the challenges of maintaining focus and momentum in their learning journey.

Limited Access to Resources: Some participants, numbering 15 out of 42, expressed frustration with limited access to resources in online learning environments. Participant 25 noted, "While online platforms offer a wealth of resources, I find that access to specialized materials for learning Maltese is limited compared to traditional classroom settings." Participant 26 added, "The reliance on digital materials can be restrictive, especially for learners who prefer tactile or auditory learning modalities." Participant 31 presented a dissenting perspective, stating, "While digital materials may have their limitations, I believe that online platforms provide access to a diverse range of resources that may not be available in traditional classrooms." This viewpoint challenges the notion that online learning restricts access to resources, suggesting that digital platforms offer unique opportunities for exploration and engagement with a variety of materials.

Cultural and Linguistic Barriers

A subset of participants, comprising 10 individuals, highlighted cultural and linguistic barriers as obstacles in online learning. Participant 27 stated, "As a non-native speaker of Maltese, I struggle to grasp cultural nuances and linguistic subtleties without the guidance of an instructor." Participant 28 added, "Online platforms may not adequately cater to the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of learners, leading to feelings of exclusion or misunderstanding.

However, Participant 32 offered a differing viewpoint, stating, "While online platforms may not fully address the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of learners, I believe that proactive engagement and collaboration within online communities can help bridge these gaps." This perspective challenges the notion that online platforms inherently perpetuate feelings of exclusion or misunderstanding, suggesting that with concerted effort and community support, learners can overcome cultural and linguistic barriers in online learning environments. The challenges which were mentioned by the participants underscore the complexities inherent in online learning and highlight the need for tailored strategies and support mechanisms to address the diverse needs and preferences of adult learners studying Maltese online.

5. DISCUSSION

This study's results present a nuanced understanding of the reasons behind the preference for online learning among the participants. Several factors contribute to this preference, each reflecting the diverse needs and experiences of adult learners. The majority of participants, representing 30 out of 42 individuals, emphasized the flexibility and convenience offered by online learning. This sentiment resonates with contemporary discourse surrounding the advantages of digital education. Participant 1's remark regarding the ability to study at one's own pace and accommodate personal commitments underscores the autonomy afforded by online platforms. However, Participant 17's dissenting view sheds light on the potential drawbacks of this flexibility, emphasizing the importance of structure and accountability in maintaining academic progress. While online learning provides flexibility, ensuring effective time management and self-discipline remains a challenge for some learners.

The accessibility of online resources emerged as a crucial factor influencing participants' preference for online learning, with 32 out of 42 individuals highlighting this aspect. Participant 2's acknowledgement of the abundance of digital materials underscores the richness of online learning environments. However, Participant 14's contrasting perspective draws attention to the quality and reliability concerns associated with online resources. This discrepancy highlights the need for robust curation and validation processes to ensure that learners have access to credible and relevant materials. Moreover, fostering digital literacy skills to navigate and evaluate online resources effectively is imperative in optimizing the learning experience.

The appreciation for the interactive nature of online learning platforms among 28 participants underscores the importance of engagement and collaboration in the learning process. Participant 10's emphasis on real-time interaction reflects the value of digital tools in fostering dynamic discussions and peer-to-peer learning opportunities. Nevertheless, Participant 15's critique regarding the limitations of virtual communication highlights the challenges in replicating the interpersonal connections facilitated by face-to-face interactions. Enhancing virtual communication strategies and incorporating innovative technologies such as virtual reality may address these limitations and promote more immersive learning experiences.

The elimination of geographical barriers in online learning was cited by 25 participants as a significant advantage. Participant 8 and Participant 9's accounts underscore the transformative impact of online platforms in ensuring access to language education for individuals residing in remote or transient locations. However, Participant 16's dissenting view draws attention to the potential trade-offs associated with geographical accessibility, particularly regarding cultural immersion and community engagement. Balancing the benefits of accessibility with the value of in-person interactions necessitates a nuanced approach to designing online learning programs that prioritize both inclusivity and cultural authenticity.

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged as a pivotal factor shaping participants' preference for online learning, with 41 out of 42 individuals acknowledging its influence. Participant 12 and Participant 13's recognition of online learning as a necessary adaptation amidst the pandemic underscores the resilience and adaptability of digital education in ensuring continuity amidst disruptions. However, Participant 17's dissenting perspective highlights the social and relational aspects sacrificed in favour of remote learning. As educational institutions navigate the post-pandemic landscape, integrating hybrid learning models that combine the benefits of online and in-person instruction may address these concerns and provide a more balanced approach to education delivery.

The challenges mentioned by the participants in learning Maltese online reveal several key obstacles encountered by participants in their digital learning journey. These challenges shed light on the complexities and nuances of online education, prompting discussions around strategies to mitigate barriers and enhance the effectiveness of virtual learning environments.

The frustration with technical issues resonated with a significant portion of participants, highlighting the vulnerability of online learning to connectivity disruptions and software glitches. Participant 18 and Participant 19's experiences underscore the impact of technical failures on the learning experience, potentially impeding progress and causing frustration. However, Participant 20's contrasting perspective emphasizes the importance of responsive technical support in addressing issues promptly. This divergence of opinions underscores the need for robust technical infrastructure and support mechanisms to minimize disruptions and ensure a seamless learning experience for all participants.

The absence of face-to-face interaction emerged as a notable challenge for many participants, reflecting the desire for interpersonal connections and collaborative learning experiences. Participant 21's sentiment echoes the sentiment of participants who miss the immediacy and depth of in-person interactions. Nevertheless, Participant 29's perspective challenges the assumption that online learning inherently inhibits collaboration, suggesting that with effective facilitation and utilization of online tools, meaningful interactions can still occur. This discrepancy highlights the importance of innovative pedagogical approaches and digital communication strategies to foster engagement and community-building in virtual learning environments.

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The struggle to stay motivated in online learning environments resonated with several participants, underscoring the importance of structure and accountability in maintaining focus. Participant 23's experience reflects the challenge of self-discipline in the absence of in-person classes. Conversely, Participant 30's viewpoint suggests that proactive goal-setting and routine establishment can mitigate motivational barriers. This divergence emphasizes the need for personalized learning strategies and self-regulation techniques to support learners in overcoming motivational challenges and sustaining engagement in their learning journey.

The participants' frustration with limited access to resources highlights the complexities of digital resource availability and usability. Participant 25 and Participant 26's experiences underscore the potential drawbacks of relying solely on digital materials, particularly for learners with diverse learning preferences. However, Participant 31's perspective challenges the notion that online learning restricts resource access, emphasizing the diversity and breadth of digital resources available. This discrepancy underscores the importance of curated resource libraries and inclusive design practices to ensure equitable access to diverse learning materials for all learners.

The recognition of cultural and linguistic barriers in online learning reflects the diverse backgrounds and experiences of participants. Participant 27 and Participant 28's experiences highlight the challenges faced by non-native speakers in navigating cultural nuances and linguistic subtleties without instructor guidance. However, Participant 32's perspective emphasizes the potential for community engagement and collaboration to bridge these gaps, suggesting a proactive approach to fostering inclusivity and understanding in online learning environments. This contrast underscores the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy and community-building initiatives to support learners in overcoming cultural and linguistic barriers and fostering a sense of belonging in virtual learning communities.

The findings illuminate the multifaceted nature of participants' preferences for online learning, underscoring the need for a holistic understanding of the challenges and opportunities inherent in digital education. By acknowledging and addressing the diverse needs and perspectives of adult learners, educators and policymakers can foster inclusive and effective online learning environments that empower learners to achieve their educational goals in today's rapidly evolving landscape. The mentioned challenges in learning Maltese online underscore the multifaceted nature of digital education and the importance of tailored support mechanisms and inclusive design practices to address the diverse needs and preferences of adult learners. By acknowledging and addressing these challenges, educators and policymakers can foster more inclusive and effective online learning environments that empower learners to achieve their educational goals and thrive in the digital age.

5.1. The Impact of Learning Maltese Online

The analysis of challenges in learning Maltese online highlights the complex landscape of digital education and the critical need for tailored support mechanisms and inclusive design practices. As the study results suggest, addressing these challenges is paramount to fostering more inclusive and effective online learning environments for adult learners of the Maltese language.

One significant impact of learning Maltese online is the recognition of the diverse needs and preferences of adult learners. By acknowledging the multifaceted nature of digital education, educators and policymakers can develop more flexible and adaptive learning strategies that cater to individual learning styles and circumstances. For example, implementing personalized learning plans and providing access to a variety of resources can accommodate learners with different preferences, whether they prefer visual, auditory, or tactile learning modalities.

Moreover, the importance of tailored support mechanisms cannot be overstated. Educators and policymakers must invest in comprehensive technical support systems to address connectivity issues and software glitches promptly. Additionally, providing ongoing guidance and mentorship to learners can help them navigate the challenges of online learning and stay motivated throughout their language learning journey. Inclusive design practices are also crucial for creating accessible and equitable online learning environments. This includes ensuring that digital platforms are user-friendly, culturally responsive, and accommodate diverse linguistic backgrounds. By prioritizing inclusivity, educators and policymakers can promote a sense of belonging and empowerment among learners, regardless of their cultural or linguistic background.

Furthermore, addressing the challenges identified in the study can contribute to the overall effectiveness of online language learning. By fostering more collaborative and engaging learning environments, educators can enhance learners' motivation and retention of the Maltese language. This, in turn, can lead to improved language proficiency and greater cultural understanding among learners.

Therefore, the impact of learning the Maltese language online hinges on the ability of educators and policymakers to address the multifaceted challenges of digital education. By prioritizing tailored support mechanisms, inclusive design practices, and flexible learning strategies, stakeholders can create more inclusive and effective online learning environments that empower learners to achieve their educational goals and thrive in the digital age.

5.2. Teaching the Maltese language online

Teaching Maltese online presents both opportunities and challenges, as revealed by the study findings. Let's delve into the impact of teaching Maltese online by considering these findings in detail: One of the significant advantages highlighted by the study participants is the flexibility and convenience offered by online learning. Learners appreciated the ability to study at their own pace and fit their learning around work and family commitments. This flexibility allows individuals to access language instruction at times that are convenient for them, without the constraints of traditional classroom schedules. As a result, online teaching can cater to the diverse lifestyles and schedules of adult learners, making language learning more accessible to a wider audience.

The study findings also emphasize the accessibility of online resources as a key factor influencing learners' preference for online learning. Participants appreciated the abundance of supplementary materials available online, such as videos, interactive exercises, and language apps. These resources enrich the language learning experience, providing learners with a variety of tools to enhance their understanding and proficiency in Maltese. Online teaching platforms can leverage these resources to create engaging and interactive lessons that cater to different learning styles and preferences.

Online teaching platforms offer opportunities for real-time interaction with instructors and peers through forums, video conferences, and collaborative activities. This fosters a dynamic and engaging learning environment, allowing learners to participate actively in discussions and group activities. By facilitating meaningful interactions and collaboration, online teaching can enhance learners' engagement and comprehension of the Maltese language.

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For learners residing in remote or transient locations, online teaching eliminates geographical barriers to accessing language instruction. Participants highlighted online learning as the only feasible option for them to learn Maltese without commuting long distances to attend classes. Additionally, expatriates appreciated the ability to access language instruction regardless of their location, ensuring continuity in their language learning journey. Online teaching can thus reach a broader audience, including learners who may not have access to traditional classroom-based instruction.

The study findings underscore the profound impact of the global pandemic on the preference for online teaching. With the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic, online teaching offers a safer option for learners to continue their Maltese language studies without risking exposure to the virus. The transition to online teaching has been a necessary adaptation to the current circumstances, ensuring continuity in education despite disruptions caused by the pandemic. As such, online teaching has emerged as a resilient and adaptable solution to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring the continuity of language education for learners amidst unprecedented circumstances.

Despite these advantages, the study also highlights several challenges associated with teaching Maltese online. These include technical issues, lack of face-to-face interaction, difficulty staying motivated, limited access to resources, and cultural and linguistic barriers. Addressing these challenges is crucial to maximizing the impact of online teaching and creating inclusive and effective learning environments for adult learners of the Maltese language. By leveraging the opportunities afforded by online teaching while addressing its challenges, educators can enhance the quality and accessibility of language instruction, empowering learners to achieve their educational goals and thrive in today's digital age.

5.3. Limitations of this Study

While this study provides valuable insights into the preferences and challenges of adult learners regarding online learning of the Maltese language, several limitations should be considered. Firstly, the study employed a qualitative approach, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. The use of a convenience sampling technique may introduce bias, as participants were selected based on their availability and willingness to participate. Additionally, the sample size of 42 participants may not be representative of all adult learners of the Maltese language, and the demographic characteristics of the participants were not thoroughly explored. Furthermore, the study relied on self-reported data collected through semi-structured interviews, which may be subject to social desirability bias and recall bias. Participants may have provided responses that they perceived as favourable or socially acceptable, leading to potential inaccuracies in the data. Moreover, the study did not explore the perspectives of language instructors or administrators, which could provide valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities of online language instruction from a different standpoint.

Another limitation of the study is the focus on a single language, namely Maltese, which may limit the applicability of the findings to other language learning contexts. Different languages may present unique challenges and opportunities in online learning, and future research should aim to explore these variations across diverse language groups.

Additionally, the study did not investigate the long-term effects of online learning on language proficiency and retention. Understanding how online learning impacts language skills over time could provide valuable information for educators and policymakers seeking to optimize language instruction in digital environments.

Lastly, the study did not explore the role of socio-economic factors, such as access to technology and internet connectivity, which may influence individuals' experiences with online learning. Future research should consider these socio-economic factors to ensure equitable access to online education for all learners.

While this study offers valuable insights into the preferences and challenges of adult learners regarding online learning of the Maltese language, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. Future research should aim to address these limitations to provide a more comprehensive understanding of online language instruction and its impact on learners' experiences and outcomes.

5.4. Recommendations for Further Research

Building upon the findings and limitations of this study, several avenues for future research can be explored to deepen our understanding of online language instruction, particularly in the context of learning Maltese. Firstly, future studies should aim to employ larger and more diverse samples to enhance the generalizability of findings. By including participants from varied demographic backgrounds, such as age, gender, and socio-economic status, researchers can capture a more comprehensive range of perspectives and experiences with online language learning.

Moreover, longitudinal studies are warranted to investigate the long-term effects of online language instruction on language proficiency and retention. Tracking participants' progress over an extended period can provide valuable insights into the sustainability and efficacy of online learning approaches. Additionally, incorporating objective measures of language proficiency, such as standardized tests or performance assessments, can complement self-reported data and offer a more robust evaluation of learners' language skills. Furthermore, future research should explore the role of technology and instructional design in optimizing online language instruction. Investigating the effectiveness of different online learning platforms, multimedia resources, and instructional strategies can inform the development of evidence-based best practices for online language education. Additionally, studies examining the impact of virtual reality, gamification, and other emerging technologies on language learning outcomes are warranted to capitalize on innovative approaches to online instruction.

In addition to technological considerations, future research should also examine the socio-cultural factors influencing online language learning experiences. Exploring the intersection of language learning with identity, culture, and social dynamics can deepen our understanding of how learners navigate digital learning environments and foster a sense of belonging and community online.

Moreover, comparative studies that contrast online and traditional classroom-based language instruction can provide valuable insights into the relative advantages and disadvantages of each modality. By examining differences in learning outcomes, engagement levels, and student satisfaction, researchers can identify areas for improvement and inform decision-making regarding the adoption of online learning platforms.

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Lastly, future research should prioritize the development and evaluation of inclusive and accessible online learning environments. Investigating strategies to address barriers related to digital literacy, internet connectivity, and socio-economic disparities can promote equitable access to online language education for all learners. Additionally, exploring the needs of diverse learner populations, such as individuals with disabilities or those from marginalized communities, can inform the design of more inclusive instructional practices and support mechanisms.

In summary, future research should focus on expanding the scope and depth of inquiry into online language instruction, encompassing diverse participant groups, longitudinal assessments, technological innovations, socio-cultural dynamics, comparative analyses, and inclusive design principles. By addressing these areas of investigation, scholars can contribute to the advancement of knowledge and practice in online language education, ultimately enhancing the quality and accessibility of language learning experiences for learners worldwide.

6. CONCLUSION

The current study has shed light on the multifaceted nature of online language instruction, particularly in the context of learning Maltese. Through thematic analysis of participant interviews, several key themes and challenges have emerged, providing valuable insights into the experiences and perspectives of adult learners engaged in online language learning. The findings of this study underscore the diverse motivations, preferences, and challenges encountered by participants in their online language-learning journeys. From the flexibility and convenience afforded by online platforms to the technical issues and lack of face-to-face interaction, participants articulated a range of experiences that shape their perceptions of online language instruction. Despite the challenges highlighted, the overwhelming consensus among participants regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic underscores the pivotal role of online platforms in ensuring the continuity of education amidst unprecedented circumstances. The adaptability and resilience of online learning have enabled participants to pursue their language learning goals in the face of disruptions and uncertainties.

Moreover, the study findings emphasize the importance of tailored support mechanisms and inclusive design practices to address the diverse needs and preferences of adult learners engaged in online language instruction. By acknowledging and addressing these challenges, educators and policymakers can foster more inclusive and effective online learning environments that empower learners to achieve their educational goals and thrive in the digital age.

Future research should explore avenues for enhancing the efficacy and accessibility of online language instruction, including the development of evidence-based best practices, the integration of innovative technologies, and the promotion of inclusive design principles. By advancing our understanding of online language education, researchers can contribute to the ongoing evolution of digital learning environments and ensure equitable access to language learning opportunities for learners worldwide.

Consequently, this study serves as a stepping stone towards a deeper understanding of online language instruction and its implications for adult learners studying Maltese. By illuminating the challenges and opportunities inherent in online learning, this research lays the groundwork for continued exploration and innovation in the field of digital language education.

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