Enhancing Retention in Part-Time French Language Courses at the University of Botswana

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Abstract

Recognizing the growing demand for French language skills in Botswana due to the country's expanding diplomatic and trade relations, the University of Botswana's Department of French introduced part-time classes in 2015. These part-time classes are designed to accommodate professionals from diverse fields, offering general French (GF) instruction to support their engagement in global markets. The strong enrolment numbers in the initial sessions confirmed the perceived importance of French for Botswana residents, and this trend has continued over the years. However, despite consistently high enrolment rates, the department faces significant retention challenges. A notable proportion of learners discontinue their studies after completing A1.1 or A1.2 levels: the basic levels that do not provide sufficient proficiency for professional use. This high dropout rate limits the long-term impact of the programme in equipping professionals with functional language skills. This study employs questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to investigate the factors contributing to early withdrawals from the programme and to identify strategies for improving retention. By identifying key obstacles and developing targeted interventions, this research seeks to enhance learner progression to higher levels, ultimately ensuring that Botswana's workforce can fully leverage French language skills in an increasingly globalized economy.

Keywords: parttime learners, attrition rate, student retention, successful completion, French in Botswana

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Introduction

The University of Botswana recognises the strategic role of proficiency in the French language in progressing economic participation for lifelong societal development. In this age of growing global interdependence, French plays an essential role as a medium for commerce, diplomacy, and cultural exchange across much of Africa, where it is the official language in more than thirty countries. The University of Botswana's French language programmes are thus designed to enable learners to attain at least the B1 level of proficiency, as defined by the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR), which categorises this level as that of an "independent user" (Council of Europe, 2001). At this stage, learners are expected to efficiently perform a range of communicative tasks in the professional as well as social register, thereby contributing effectively to Botswana's engagement in regional and international fora.

Context of Part-Time Classes of French at the University of Botswana

Part-time classes were introduced in 2015 with the objective of popularising the uptake of French and contributing towards skills development in Botswana. The long-term objective of these was to serve as a marketing tool for the University of Botswana's Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts French Studies programme at the University of Botswana. The targeted population comprised of the University of Botswana students who saw the need to pair their learning programme with a language proficiency, employed individuals who understood the importance of French as a skill towards their professional development**,** individuals seeking to learn the language and culture of French for their personal development, corporates who do business with Francophone countries and therefore need to have the requisite level of proficiency allowing them to communicate with their Francophone counterparts.

The year 2025 marks the ten-year mark of the existence of these classes, an opportunity to look back and reflect. Despite initial objectives, progression rates within the part-time programme show challenges. There are consistently more than 20 learners at A1.1 level, between ten (10) and fifteen (15) at A1.2, level less than eight (8) at A2, and less than seven (7) at B1. Since inception of these classes, there has only been one (1) recorded enrolment at B2 and it dates back to the year 2022. This decrease in enrolment suggests that while initial interest in learning French is high, sustaining learner engagement is difficult at higher levels of proficiency. Moreover, the programme was introduced without any formal needs analysis. This raises the question of whether the current exit outcomes address the motivations, expectations, and practical needs of its target audience.

The purpose of this present paper is to investigate reasons for the high dropout rate among part-time French language learners at the University of Botswana. Specifically, it interrogates factors which can be attributed to the attrition rate we have alluded to earlier. The literature review will include a discussion on ideologies of retention in higher education, factors that contribute to persistence, withdrawal, and successful strategies used for enhancing retention. This will help identify any possible differences between retention for mainstream university programmes and part-time university programmes.

Literature Review

Retention Definition

From the Cambridge dictionary's business perspective, retention is the ability of a company to keep its customers, rather than losing them to competitors. Applying this definition to the education sector, and in the context of our research problem, we can therefore say it is the ability of the University of Botswana to keep learners, rather than losing them to other institutions or other offers. In alignment with this dictionary definition, Glenda Crosling (2017) argues that "Retaining students in their studies until completion, rather than them 'dropping out,' is seen as a significant measure of the effectiveness of academic programs and processes." This interpretation presupposes that it is the role of the entity offering instruction to make deliberate measures to retain.

However, there is another approach which defines retention by bringing it to a shared responsibility between learners and institutions (Burke, 2019).

> In this shared responsibility, students are required to be committed and study seriously to underpin their success; at the same time, institutions need to be dynamic and student responsive, recognizing and addressing the varying needs of students as they impact on academic studies and the student experience. That is, rather than exclusively expecting students to assimilate into the established academic system, institutions need to adjust their programs and processes to accommodate differing student cohorts. (Crosling 2017; Rendon et al., 2004)

This implies that in order to attain the desired minimum exit level of B1, learners have to take their learning seriously and at the same time the University, rather than expecting learners, many of whom are adult professionals with commitments, to simply assimilate into a fixed academic structure, must adapt its delivery modes, support mechanisms, and curricular focus to better accommodate the realities of part-time adult language learners.

Put into context, the argument by Glenda Crosling aligns with the education landscape as it currently has transformed to a point where the law of supply and demand prevails in such a way that it is the demand which conditions the offer. With many institutions mushrooming and providing similar offers, the learner, potential client has the possibility to shop around and dictate their preferences to the offering institutions.

As we explore the literature on learner retention, we need to take into consideration research limitations of this paper: the focus on part-time French Language courses. This introduces a different perspective to the current narrative on retention which lies both on distinguishing between traditional and non-traditional students but as well as the complexity of retaining part-time foreign language learners. Where previous research on retention of students attribute retention and successful completion of programmes to learner commitment, focused research on part-time learner retention in the likes of Bean and Metzner's Student Attrition model (1985) acknowledges that adult learners are different from traditional undergraduate learners and that they may face significant challenges during their academic journey that could hinder them to successfully complete their studies. These fall into several categories which include situational, institutional, dispositional, and academic barriers.

Situational Barriers

These are defined as influences that are external and beyond the individual's control (Falasca, 2011). Situational or external barriers include personal challenges which include multiple responsibilities at home, family, children, lack of affordable childcare services and lack of support from others. Baharudin et al. (2013) state that it is mostly working women who face situational barriers. True to the part-time French language courses at the University of Botswana, situational barriers are to be expected given that enrolled learners are mostly working class who have families and careers to take care of. The immediate challenges to be expected for such a cohort would be how to share time and resources between a full-time job or full-time responsibility with a part-time learning programme which requires full dedication even though it is supposedly a "part-time." Closely linked to these situational barriers are dispositional barriers.

Dispositional Barriers

These emanate from within. They refer to how the learner perceives herself or himself, their attitude. They include low self-esteem, negative attitudes about being an adult learner for instance being too old, too busy, too tired, too sick, not smart enough, being not rich enough, don't have enough time, don't need any more education, don't have adequate language skills, and not being interested in the programme (Baharudin et al., 2013; MacKeracher et al., 2006). More often, adult learners expect learning to connect directly to work, family, or personal goals. When programs are seen as lacking clear relevance, this might reduce perceived value and persistence.

Institutional Barriers

Institutional barriers refer to the way institutions design and deliver their courses. When it comes to adults, literature shows that unlike for traditional undergraduate learners, there is never financial support provided to adult learners' programme (Baharudin et al., 2013). In the design and delivery of courses again, where traditional programmes are paced and are tied to a certain timeline, non-traditional learners prefer a slow-paced mode of delivery which links to the situational barriers. A full-time working adult might not be available every week for lessons given that their job might require them to work out of station or even to work overtime in order to meet deadlines. This is one consideration that institutions have to make as they offer such courses to the working class.

Academic Barriers

They refer to the skills that are necessary for smooth and successful learning. These include computer related skills. In today's world they include the use of online teaching and learning platforms such as Teams. The non-mastery of such in adulthood or in in-service training could lead to learners not being able to follow. In addition to computer related skills, there are also pedagogical and employment barriers. Pedagogical barriers largely stem from a limited awareness among instructors, facilitators, and administrators regarding the principles of adult learning. This includes insufficient understanding of the value of learner-centred and active learning approaches, as well as a lack of recognition of the diversity that exists among adult learners in terms of learning styles and preferred modes of engagement (Baharudin et al., 2013; MacKeracher et al., 2016; Suart & Potter, 2006).

Enhancing Retention

An appreciation of barriers inherent to high attrition rates, leads to exploring measures to enhance retention from both actors: the learner as well as the institution. Our postulate is that retention is both a responsibility of both the learner and the institution and as such both parties must be considered in strategies that aim at enhancing retention.

The Institution

Literature suggests several strategies that institutions could come up with to increase the completion rate.

Learner Centred Pedagogies and Curriculum Approaches

Zepke et al. (2006) highlight the value of moving towards "adaptation discourse," in which institutions adjust policies, teaching methods, and support services to meet the needs of diverse learners. In the case of our context, this could mean using resources that resonate with the adult/world of work material and adjusting time and calendar schedules. Crosling (2017) and Thomas (2002) corroborate this by arguing that academic engagement is a key driver of retention and that syllabi must offer profession-based content. This suggests the need to do a needs analysis for every cohort as students' reasons for embarking on learning French may be different, hence the need to move away from General French which is a one size fits all approach.

The Learner

Following a study carried out on challenges faced by postgraduate students, Baharudin et al. (2013) argue that the adult learner has some responsibility towards making sure that they graduate. They recommend that adult learners question themselves on the purpose of continuing their study and take every challenge as a motivator for them to improve in their studies and life (Baharudin et al., 2013). This is in alignment with our thought that before embarking on any learning journey, the adult learner should set clear goals. In our case, they need to interrogate why they would like to learn French. In addition to the goals, the learner must anticipate that there are likely to be challenges in the journey, and they should come up with mechanisms to adjust and adapt in place.

Methodology

Data for this research was drawn from questionnaires administered to both present and past learners of the programme, interviews administered to the programme coordinator as well as data from past empirical research. The aim of the study was to address the following research questions:

1. What factors contribute to early withdrawals from the programme?
2. What strategies can be used to improve retention?
3. To what extent are students satisfied with the programme of study and its administration?

To address these questions, a set of questionnaires were administered to a total number of 19 learners both former students who had withdrawn from the programme and current students enrolled in the programme. The respondents ranged from level A1.1 to B2. The interview

guide was used to conduct an in-depth interview with the course coordinator, providing additional insights into programme administration and retention-related challenges.

Findings

Below is an account of what emerged from the data collected.

Section A: Demographic Info

1. Age

The participants' age ranges between 18 and 47. Most learners (14 out of 19) are under 35 years old, indicating a predominantly young adult learner population.

2. Profession

6 of the respondents are students or recent graduates, while the rest are working professionals from diverse sectors, including education, finance, administration, and self-employment.

3. Prior Learning of French Before the Programme

Only 5 respondents indicated they had not studied French before joining the programme while the rest had**.**

Section B: Learners' Motivations, Goals, and Orientation to Progression

1. Motivations for Enrolment

Learners were primarily motivated by a combination of career advancement, personal interest, and travel. The dominant category was personal enrichment, followed closely by professional growth:

- Career-Oriented Motivation: Several respondents enrolled to improve their competitiveness in the job market. One participant wrote:

  "Career advancement—to teach French in primary/secondary schools." (Respondent 4)

- Personal and Academic Enrichment: Many learners cited intrinsic motivations:

  "Personal interest, fluency, attaining a certificate." (Respondent 5)

  "Academic requirement… and reading/writing for work." (Respondent 17)

- Travel: Some combined aspirations:

  "Career advancement, personal interest, travel." (Respondent 8)

This shows a learner profile that is diverse in goals, indicating the need for flexible content that can cater to both professional and personal aspirations.

2. Learning Goals and Proficiency Targets

Nearly all learners aim for high proficiency (C1 or C2), indicating long-term commitment:

- 10 out of 19 respondents selected C2 as their target level.
- A few aimed for B2 or C1, and only one for A1 (Respondent 15).

This ambition shows a desire for functional fluency, yet it contrasts with later results on course completion. It also reflects high learner expectations.

3. Employer Expectations

Only a few learners indicated employer-driven requirements:

- Most answered "No," and a few said "Somewhat," indicating self-driven learning.
- Respondent 2, for instance, selected "Somewhat" but linked learning goals to both fluency and career use, reflecting a semi-obligated but self-motivated learner profile.

This suggests that the majority are intrinsically motivated, not necessarily bound by workplace pressures an important consideration when framing retention strategies.

4. Time Frames for Completion

Time expectations varied:

- Most aimed to complete their learning within 1 to 4 years.
- One respondent (Respondent 12) expected proficiency in just 10 weeks, which may indicate a misalignment of expectations**.**

Overall, this highlights the importance of setting realistic learning trajectories, possibly through orientation workshops or progression guides.

5. Communication on Progression

This is a critical area of concern raised by many participants.

- Several respondents noted a lack of clear information:

  "No, it was not communicated… I am not aware what the passing mark is... or if one can re-write." (Respondent 1)

  "I honestly don't remember." (Respondent 2)

- On the other hand, some learners praised the communication efforts:

  "Yes, the progression through the course levels was clearly communicated from the time of enrollment. I was given a course outline." (Respondent 4)

  "Absolutely, our lecturer ensured that we do activities that forced every student to participate." (Respondent 3)

This inconsistency signals that orientation and communication practices vary between lecturers. While some learners had a structured experience, others lacked basic information about progression, certification, and evaluation.

Key Takeaways From Section B:

1. Learners are highly motivated, with goals ranging from personal interest to professional certification, and most aim for advanced levels (C1/C2).
2. The program largely attracts self-motivated adults, not those mandated by employers.
3. There is a mismatch between learner expectations and the program's communication on outcomes, which may hinder satisfaction and retention.
4. Clear, consistent communication about levels, assessment standards, and progression opportunities (e.g., DELF certification, re-sits, and completion certificates) is urgently needed.

Section C: Course Delivery, Perceptions and Challenges

This section sheds light on how learners perceived the key dimensions of the evening French course: content, pedagogy, materials, timing, support, progression tracking, and relevance. It also reveals critical factors influencing dropout or continuation.

1. Course Ratings: Content, Teaching Methods and Materials

The overall reception of course content and teaching methods was positive:

- Most respondents rated course content as "Good" or "Excellent."
- Teaching methods also received excellent feedback, with comments such as:

  "Our lecturer ensured that we do activities that forced every student to participate in class… highlighted my weak spots and encouraged me to work on them." (Respondent 3)

- Learning materials were also well-rated, but a few entries were blank or rated "average," suggesting inconsistency in material provision.

The pedagogical core of the program is sound and appreciated by learners, though access to materials might benefit from greater standardization.

2. Course Timing and Duration

- Class timing was generally rated as "Good" or "Average," but multiple respondents pointed to practical challenges with timing:

  "Meeting at 5.30 pm was tricky as there was never enough time to get home and settle after work." (Respondent 2)

  "Class duration is too long." (Respondent 6)

- A few learners preferred shorter or weekend classes, especially those juggling family and work commitments.

Timing remains a structural barrier, especially for adult learners who need more flexibility.

3. Lecturer Support and Progress Tracking

- Lecturer support was generally viewed positively, but progress tracking was more variable.
- Only a few learners reported excellent tracking, while others described it as average or poor.
- Some indicated that they were unaware of their progression, aligning with findings from Section B.

While lecturer support is a strength, the tracking and communication of learner progress remain weak points in the program.

4. Course Relevance to Professional Needs

- Responses on whether the course was adapted to learners' professional goals were mostly "Somewhat" or "No":

  "The course lacked relevance to my work." (Respondent 4)

  "Somewhat adapted." (Several respondents)

This reflects that professional scenarios are not integrated to cater for learners with clear occupational goals (e.g., teachers, administrators, bankers).

5. Challenges Faced

Nearly all respondents listed time constraints and work/family obligations as major challenges:

Additional obstacles included:

- Lack of motivation (Respondents 7, 11, 13, 16, 17)
- Course too slow or too difficult (Respondents 8, 16, 17)
- Online learning dissatisfaction:

  "I prefer face-to-face interactions." (Respondent 5)

Respondent 3 stated they could not sit for the exam due to internship conflicts and described a lack of flexibility in exam rescheduling.

The intersection of adult learner life demands, and course rigidity emerges as the most significant retention barrier.

6. Course Completion Levels

Out of 19 learners: 12 completed their level and 7 did not complete, often due to time, financial, or logistical issues.

Among those who dropped out:

- Most stopped around A2 level.
- This aligns with earlier findings that many learners do not progress beyond early stages, despite aiming for advanced proficiency.

Key Takeaways From Section C:

1. Teaching quality and content delivery are appreciated, with active learning practices praised by many learners.
2. However, progress tracking and content adaptation to learners' professional needs require improvement.
3. Class timing, duration, and modality (online vs. physical) are significant pain points.
4. Life obligations, especially for adult learners, are the primary obstacle to retention and progression.
5. A substantial proportion of learners discontinue before intermediate level, despite initial aspirations.

Section D: Learner Commitment and Recommendations

1. Learners' Intention to Resume

Out of 19 respondents:15 expressed intent to resume the course 3 were unsure while 1 said no. The high rate of intended return demonstrates strong motivation, despite prior interruptions. It also demonstrates that dropout is often due to external forces, not due to lack of interest or disengagement.

2. Conditions That Would Make Continuation Easier

Respondents identified several key changes that would facilitate their return and sustained engagement:

A. More Flexible Scheduling

Many learners expressed difficulties attending classes after work. Suggestions included:

- Starting classes later (e.g., 6 p.m.)
- Weekend options

"Starting at 6 p.m. to give us more time to get from office to home and settled." (Respondent 2)

"Class duration is too long." (Respondent 6)

This reflects the tension between adult learners' professional/family responsibilities and rigid course schedules.

B. Physical and Interactive Learning

Several learners found online classes demotivating or difficult to follow:

"Introduce physical classes for those who prefer them." (Respondent 5)

"More interaction and engagement." (Respondent 16

"Physical classes are more interactive." (Respondent 8)

This calls for hybrid models that accommodate preferences for in-person learning.

C. Enhanced Course Communication and Structure

Learners stressed the need for clarity regarding:
- Course outlines
- Assessment expectations
- Progression schedules

“Provide a course outline at the beginning… it gives a sense of expectations.” (Respondent 9)

“More structured schedule.” (Respondent 13)

D. More Practice and Support

Suggestions also focused on strengthening learning through:
- Homework and revision resources
- Recorded lessons
- Practice exercises (even ungraded)

“Record classes for future reference.” (Respondent 6)

“Have homework… even if not marked, so we can correct in class.” (Respondent 17)

“Reading lessons for easier revision.” (Respondent 7)

These requests show learners value autonomy-supportive materials and opportunities for reinforcement beyond class time.

E. Technical and Financial Support

Some respondents faced financial instability or lacked access to reliable technology:

“If there are scholarships or anything of the sort available, it would be great.” (Respondent 2)

“Ensure all students have full access to Teams App.” (Respondent 1)

These points to structural barriers that could be addressed with needs-based support programs.

3. Specific Suggestions for Improvement

Respondents proposed a wide array of concrete ideas, including:
- Facilitating DELF exams in place of internal assessments
- Organizing student-led speaking opportunities

- Using multimedia resources and recorded tutorials
- Encouraging cultural engagement and community interaction.

"Hosting fares and travelling where students can interact with native speakers to build a French community." (Respondent 8)

This shows a rich learner-generated vision for improving course delivery, which aligns with principles of engaged learning.

Key Takeaways From Section D:

1. Most learners want to continue, confirming that dropout is driven by external factors rather than lack of interest programme (Baharudin et al., 2013; MacKeracher et al., 2006).
2. Learners seek more flexible and responsive formats, especially regarding class timing and delivery mode.
3. There is a demand for greater structure, transparency, and learner autonomy—through course outlines, recorded materials, and self-paced revision tools (Crosling, 2017).
4. Suggestions reflect a strong desire for interactivity, and professional relevance, not just language acquisition.
5. Institutional support—whether technical, pedagogical, or financial—can significantly impact retention and learner satisfaction.

Conclusion

The investigation into learner retention in the University of Botswana's part-time French language classes reveals a complex interplay of institutional constraints, pedagogical practices, and learner experiences. The initially intended objective of serving as a marketing tool for mainstream programmes as well as for skills development in the country has been achieved with some learners having managed to integrate job markets at international levels, while some have managed to integrate the private sector market or even open their own enterprises in the tourism sector, education sector or even services sector. Nevertheless, perspectives expressed by both the coordinator and the learners converge on several key issues, pointing out to a programme with strong foundations but lacking in cohesion, institutional support and learner centred planning.

Recommendations

There needs to be a deliberate review of the programme which is guided by the dictates of the market demands to answer the question why teach part-time French at the University of Botswana? Below are some of the options that could be explored to help remedy the situation.

Table 1
The Recommendations to Help Remedy the Situation

Type of support	Recommendation
1. Institutional	The university should consider having at least 1 staff member who focuses exclusively on the evening classes.
2. Orientation Sessions	Introduce mandatory orientation for all new students and a learner guide that outlines the levels, course outlines, expected timelines, assessment and progression criteria.
3. Hybrid and Flexible Scheduling	Classes could start at 18:00 instead of 17:30 and maybe on weekends. Where possible, classes could be hybrid to cater for those who prefer face-to-face.
4. Pedagogical Enhancement	The curriculum should be tailored to learners' needs by offering professional French rather than general one.
5. Learner Engagement and learner support	There should be scheduled cultural nights that include movies and conversation cafes. Learners should be given more exercises.
6. Progress Monitoring and Certification	There should be both formative and summative assessments. DELF accreditation should be explored for internationally recognised certificates
7. Feedback and Continuous Improvement	Implement post-session surveys whose data should be used to inform curriculum adjustment and review.

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