

THE CHALLENGES OF FRENCH LANGUAGE LEARNER IN NIGERIA: AN OVERVIEW

¹Segun Felix Daramola & ² Cheryl Amaka Udogu

^{1&2}Department of Modern European Languages
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Abstract

Language serves to promote understanding and facilitate communication between the speaker and the addressee; therefore, in order for communication to occur, the transmitter must be understandable to the addressee. The foundation of French language learner in Nigeria is one of the issues that is confronting the teaching and learning of foreign languages in the country. Our approach in this article is based on the psychological methods; many learners of French as second language in Nigeria's education system have very poor French language foundation right from their primary and secondary education. The goal of this work is to determine how French language teachers can do all in their power to ensure that their students develop strong oral and writing communication skills so they can stay up to date in their field. Therefore, in order to address these issues, this research looks at some of the obstacles that hinder French language instruction in Nigerian higher education institutions and offers workable solutions. The main findings of the study range from like of functional laboratories, bad methods of admission of students who did not initially planned to study French language, students' teacher's ratio, overcrowded classrooms, and poor perception of French by the public.

Keywords: Language, Teaching, Learning, French Language.

Introduction

The French language in Nigeria started in three phases. The first phase can be dated to the 19th century as documented by Balogun, during this period; it was the individual decision that motivated the quest to acquire competence in foreign languages such as French. Nigeria was colonized by the British, so the French were not supported by their government. Therefore, the advantages for Africans who studied this language on their own were universal empower to gain an access to information, French was progressively added to the curriculum as school administrators noticed that non-French-speaking Africans were interested in learning the language. Balogun cited that, after a British law was implemented that forbade the teaching of any other European language except English in educational institutions across the British colonies. French was reinstated to Nigeria despite the 1882 law prohibiting it, and was only facilitated by missionary schools. It is now possible to say that Nigeria experienced a second French phase between 1909 to 1995. After independence in 1960, the Nigerian government adopted it as a subject of study in public schools on the grounds that Nigeria needed to foster cooperation and understanding with its French neighbour's countries, to facilitate communication with France and to build relationship with others French-speaking countries around the world. Brown said, the third phase of French in Nigeria began in 1996, following the vision of the late General Sanni Abacha, who made French language as the second official language in the country and the head of state saw the need of French not just as a medium to facilitate communication between two or more countries, but as a means of communication between the country's other ethnic groups.

The French language is one of the very well-spoken international languages in the world. Nigeria needed French language as result of been surrounded by French-speaking nations

such as the Republic of Niger in the north, the Republic of Benin in the west, Cameroon in the east, and Chad in the northeast. The influence of French societies on Nigeria in social, political, economic, and global affairs are immeasurable. Many African nations have French as their official language this is because 22% of French nation worldwide live in Africa, certain percentage of these countries using French as their official language. Nigeria has made learning of French language mandatory subject in junior secondary because of its geographic location. According to Alaje “language performs a unifying and separatist function. This refers to the feeling of members of a social group that they are united and identified with others who speak the same language while they contrast with or are separated from others who speak other languages”(161). In Nigeria, there are numerous languages, according to Tijani, national languages are about 646 while Alaje also cited about 550 languages in Nigeria, these languages pose challenge to learning and teaching of French language in the nation. French language is an international language that is commonly used in business, science and technology, administration, and education. Nigeria and French-speaking nations could collaborate in the fields of science and technology by learning their language but the collaboration cannot be achieved if difficulty in learning of the language is not solved. Furthermore, for Nigeria to maintain positive relations with its French-speaking neighbours, knowledge in the language is required so that it will help the nation to build mutual relations with these countries. It is important to be bilingual when communicating not just with the French-speaking neighbouring countries but also with people in other French-world. Language is one of the tools being used to facilitate global interaction in business, politics, religion and education, however despite the relevance of French language to Nigeria’s nation building it has faced setback in area of teaching and learning. French language instruction has faced numerous challenges since it was first incorporated into the Nigerian educational system. This research will explore core challenges encountered by Nigeria learning of French language.

The world today is a global village, Offorma explained on globalization of French language:

French Language Education in Nigeria has bright prospects. First of all, the geographical position of Nigeria makes it imperative for all Nigerians to speak French. Effective communication promotes understanding, peace and harmony. And so, if Nigerians understand French, there will be effective communication with her francophone neighbours. One way of achieving this is by teaching the language in schools. Though it is a core curriculum at both the primary and junior secondary school, the inadequacy of teachers hampers the effective implementation of this policy (184).

The society is polyglot for effective communication. Language serves as a channel of communication, and today's global organizations employ French as one of their global languages for meetings; conferences, workshops, seminars, and other events. Nigeria holds memberships in the majority of international organizations and maintains connections with a few of them. These connections benefited Nigeria greatly. Nigerians need to learn and speak French because of the social, political, educational, technological, and economic values. In our society today, all governments, institutions, and agencies are focused on globalization. One of the key reasons Nigerians need French because that the language is being used in research, trade, tourism, diplomacy, and both in science and technology.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this paper is the theory of inter-language proposed by Selinker, an American linguist. Selinker introduced the concept of inter-language theory of second language acquisition. Inter-language is a linguistic theory used by someone learning a foreign language different with the speaker’s first language or the target language being acquired.

According to Selinka cited by Xin Wang, inter-language is the separateness of a second language learner's system, a system that has a structurally-intermediate status between the native and target language (10). In a word, inter-language is a language system between native language and target language used by L2 learners. In terms of phonetics, vocabulary, grammar, culture, and communicative function, this system differs from both the learners' native language and the target language. Furthermore, it is a motivational language system that approaches target language accuracy during the learning and development process.

Selinker suggested the five principle processes operated in inter-language:

- 1) Language transference is a process of second language acquisition wrongly applied the rule of native language intentionally or unconsciously because they do not fully understand the rules of the target language; this application has created difficulty for Nigerian learners of French language.
- 2) Transference training explains how learners misunderstand and abuse the rules of the target language due to teachers' inappropriate or non-native language use as well as their inappropriate use of materials. If these errors occur during the primary stage, it might have a lasting impact. In other word, it might post many challenges to the performances of French learner because short fall of language teacher in our nation.
- 3) Study strategy for second language learning is very effective strategy to adopt in second language acquisition that will improve the performances of French students, some special ways or methods to obtain and manage language is to input study materials as part of study processing. Some of these strategies are logical and conductive.
- 4) Communication strategy of second language acquisition, many language learners who converse with native speakers come to the realization that some mistakes do not impair their ability to express thoughts. As a result, they are persuaded to believe that there is no need to further develop inter-language communication skills as long as they do not interfere with their communication.
- 5) Overgeneralization of target language, it is when learners apply a grammar rule that they have previously acquired to a second language acquisition, based on this analysis many Nigerian learners of French encounter this challenge as a result of overgeneralization.

Literature Review

This research is going to explore some related works done on the challenges of French language learner in Nigeria. Osawaru explained that:

Over the last two decades or thereabout, French Departments in some Nigerian Universities have been grappling with a plethora of students admitted to study French. It is paradoxical that a discipline that naturally finds it difficult to attract half the number of expected students for each academic session is now contending with trice the required number of students. Even so, the reason for this is not far-fetched : in its obvious intent to reduce the number of candidates who usually apply to study Law and International Studies and Diplomacy and also to ensure that other disciplines with not so encouraging public perception remain relevant and contribute their own quota to national development and professional formation, the Admission Boards of some universities in Nigeria consider it expedient to assign some candidates to study courses other than the ones they originally opted for (17).

Because of this, the French teachers at the Nigerian University have taken the initiative to implement a plan that has raised the number of students enrolled in our several (French) departments. Our institutions' French departments accept applicants with or without prior French proficiency and raise them to the necessary level during the course of their four-year degree program. The French teacher in Nigerian institution is thus faced with an uphill battle. Thus, it is nearly difficult for the French teacher to guide each student and ensure that they receive the necessary attention to produce the intended learning outcomes. According to Lawal argued that: This policy direction of the government towards effective teaching and learning of French has made both the parents and the students to have some mixed feelings or loss of interest for the language (12).As a results of this, a lot of parents view learning French as a waste of time and money. The majority of them would rather focus their efforts on other courses rather than sending their children to study French in our institution of higher learning. Inegbe said that:

Several factors retard and slow down speech skills, communicative competence as well as the functional use of French for effective communication by the learner and speaker of French language. A learner/speaker who shows interest to learn/speak French as a language should be screened using oral interviews in order to ascertain the peculiar language needs of each of the learners/speakers, thus, paying special attention to their speech problems. This screening for speech problems should be done by experts in phonetics and phonology (174).

To affirmed the opinion of Inegbe, Nigeria government needs to take great measure in conducting oral interviews before admitting students in the institutions with that the challenging will be reduced to the minimum level. One of the key components of language acquisition is exposure to the French environment, which is evidently lacking in French language learning at this level. An impartial monitoring committee should be established by the government to oversee how the strategy is being applied in elementary and secondary schools as well as in higher education.

Some Challenges Encountered by Nigerians Learning Language

French language encounters numerous problems in Nigeria and it has affected the growth of French as a second official language, among all these challenges, this work focusing on three:

- (i) **Lack of Teachers:** The very first challenge of French language in Nigeria was inadequacy of French teacher because of this challenge that led to production competent teachers to teach the subject at the secondary school level. It was then felt that the Nigerian Universities could save the situation. Therefore, the University of Nigeria, Nsukka' and the University of Ibadan, Ibadan started a pilot course in French in 1962. The training of instructors to carry out the French curriculum in secondary schools was one of the goals of the pilot program. Candidates with no prior French language experience were accepted into the Department of French, and many of them received instruction using audio-visual methods, this lack of teacher still one of the challenge confronting teaching of French at all level of our education sectors.
- (ii) **Lack of models to interact with on daily basis:** Most secondary school, college of education and universities lack proper models of interaction that will improve the learning of French and without these interacting materials the standard of French cannot be improve among our students.
- (iii) **Lack of instructional resources:** This has created a lot of setback to our educational system in Nigeria. French language was one of most affected due to lack of resources, several universities and colleges of education don't have functional language lab for oral courses and these affected oral aspect of the language among our graduated.

To reduce the difficulty encountered by French language learner in Nigeria, government needs to employ more French language teachers and acquiring models interacting materials to the school.

Conclusion

In light of the difficulties Nigerians have encountered while studying French as a second official language alongside English and Nigeria languages, this research proposes the following ideas as potential means of achieving parity between the languages in Nigeria: Learners at all levels should be inspired and motivated to acquire the language in a supportive setting, especially for a language as difficult like French. Furthermore, the Nigerian government must make every effort to provide sufficient and extensive manpower and materials regarding the significance of acquiring the language. This research recommends the following points: It is also important to remember that an immersion program needs to be carefully sponsored by government if Nigerian students are to be linguistically competent in the language. Government needs to assist language learners in order to visit French-speaking nations at the very lower cost. The difficulty of second language acquisition in Nigeria is enormous. Learners need to learn some related linguistic knowledge that will improve their vocabularies. During this process students slowly revise the interim systems to accommodate new hypotheses about the target language system.

References

- Alaje, Oyebola. *Solutions aux problèmes de l'interférence linguistique chez l'apprenant yorubaphone de la langue française au Nigeria*. Journal of Arts and Humanities (JAH), 2014.
- Brown, H. *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching* (4th ed.). Longman: San Francisco State University, 2000.
- Lawal, Abdullahi. *Teaching French Language in Colleges of Education in Nigeria: Challenges and Ways Forward*. PEDAGOGIA: Journal Pendidikan, Vol.9 (1).2020.
- Inegbe, Miriam. *Communicative and Speech Challenges of Teaching, Learning and Speaking French as a Foreign Language in Nigeria*. AKSU Journal of English, 2023
- Offorma, Grace. *French language education in Nigeria*, Nnsuka, 2011.
- Osawaru, Aigbeovbioso & Osawaru, Osaruese. *Some challenges of French Language Teaching and learning in Nigerian universities*. RILALE Vol.5 N°1, Février 2022, 15-24.
- Selinker, L. *Language Transfer. General Linguistics*. 1969.
- Selinker, L. *Interlanguage*. IRAL. 1972.
- Xin, Wang & Lingling Fan. *An analysis of inter-language features and English learning*. Journal of Higher Education Research. Kunming, 2020.