

**The Teaching of French as a Foreign Language in Nigeria:
Federal Colleges of Education, Okene and Oyo (Special)**

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Abstract

Foreign languages like French are studied for so many reasons (that vary) from country to country and from individual to individual depending on the individual needs and interests. This article focuses mainly on the study of French language as a second official language in Nigeria; particularly at the Colleges of Education level. It investigates the problems facing learners, teachers as well as the teaching of the subject itself as one of the College of Education courses in Nigeria. Though the French language stands to be the main thrust of this study, some of the findings and views expressed may equally be applicable to the acquisition of other foreign languages in the country.

Keywords: French language, Students Foreign Languages, Language Acquisition, Colleges of Education, Nigeria.

Introduction

For effective presentation of “the challenges of teaching French in Nigeria” the author considers it imperative in adopting the inverted pyramidal approach. Having done this, the discussion will start with the critical examination of the language in context, i.e. French language as an international and world language, and finally, a comprehensive discussion of the challenges of French language acquisition in Nigeria. This strategy is simply adopted, particularly in this kind of exposition because the ultimate goal will strictly be on the (challenges of French language acquisition), having commenced with the outermost layer (French language in Nigeria), this hopefully should provide a vivid outlook for clarity of exposition(s).

A Short Linguistic Map of French Language (Studies) in Nigeria

During the era of the scramble for Africa by the European and American colonial powers in the 19th Century, the British government recorded a tremendous success by conquering and seizing the territory around the River Niger Area. Following this conquest and seizure, the area was named “Nigeria”. Babajide (2001) observes that the name “Nigeria” is a derivational name from a blend of “Niger” and “Area”.

Lord Lugard, a popular colonial administrator then, was appointed by the London government to oversee the new British colony. This originally marked the introduction of the British colonial rule in Nigeria. From that time up till this present moment, the English Language has been the original official language in the country. Bamgbose (1971) and Babajide (2001) observe that there are about 400 indigenous languages in Nigeria. These various languages, according to Achebe (2012), are spoken by about 250 different ethnic groups. Unfortunately, none of these languages is considered to be playing the roles of the official language for obvious indigenous language as the official language will be tantamount to conferring an official status on it and imposing it on the other ethnic groups thereby subjecting them to be playing minor functions under the one selected. Since each ethnic group is emotionally attached to its language, each ethnic group is bound to resist any attempt to impose the language of another ethnic group on them. This calls for why each successive Federal Government has been avoiding the idea of adopting one particular Nigerian indigenous language as the country’s official language, and that equally affirms the reasons English language has continued to remain the only official language.

Precisely on 14th December, 1996, according to Igboanuse and Putz (2008), there was a particular declaration by the then Head of State, Gen. Sanni Abacha in a speech delivered by his Minister of Education at the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, that French would soon be introduced as a second official language in the country, to be studied compulsorily in the Primary, Secondary and Post-Secondary levels of our educational system. According to the Minister, the policy stands to make Nigeria to become bilingual in a short time. Igboanusi and Putz (2008), went further to state that the late Abacha’s speech and later decision led to the formal recognition of French as a second official language for the first time in Nigeria. Following the recognition and the adoption of the policy, elaborate preparations were made for its commencement. Scholars from Nigerian universities were ordered to prepare the curriculum for the subject in the primary and post primary institutions nationwide. The most unfortunate aspect of the policy was that immediately after the death of Gen. Sanni Abacha, it was completely abandoned and remained only a paper work.

But in the year 2016, precisely 30th January, 2016, the Minister of State for Education, Prof. Anthony Anwukah, made the announcement again that the Federal Government was soon going to reintroduce the language i.e. French as the nation's second official language. (See The Punch, 4th February, 2016 and The Guardian 21st February, 2016). Obviously, this language policy on French is bound to create a series of challenges and implications for the future of English language in Nigeria.

The study of French language as a full-fledged National Certificate on Education course is limited to 21 Colleges of Education in Nigeria (samphina.com.ng). But for the purpose of this research, our scope will be limited to two colleges namely: Federal College of Education, Okene and Federal College of Education (Special) Oyo. At Federal College of Education, Okene, the College which was among the three Federal College of Education that were established in 1974 by the Federal Government but took off officially in February, 1975. The Department of French equally took off the same year (1975) with 12 students.

One must also state that French is also offered as a course at the Federal College of Education (Special) Oyo. The Department was established in February 1998 as one of the foreign languages offered in their programme. The Programme took off with two pioneering lecturers and twenty-one students offering the subject at the preliminary-level. It must be noted that Foreign Language like Arabic is equally included alongside French as a three-year N.C.E courses.

Equally important is the fact that African had been host to a plethora of foreign languages by virtue of colonization and historical factors; Anglophone Africa, Francophone and Lusophone Africa where English, French and Portuguese are Spoken and used as official languages as the case may be respectively (Banjo, 2004, Omotade, 2001).

Bamgbose (1994) examines a rather succinct and interesting aspect of viewing language in accordance to nation building, when he refers to one of the earliest popular accounts concerning the role of language in nation building as the biblical story of the tower of Babel as recorded in Genesis 11:1-9. Nation Building as Bamgbose views it:

Involves a lot more than Physical structures. It involves a change in the individual, a re-orientation towards national goals and the harnessing of resources for the development of the nation and the welfare of its citizens. (p.1).

In sum, this paper therefore seeks to underline and elucidate the fundamental problems, challenges and limitations encountered primarily by Nigerian Colleges of Education Students

learning French as a foreign language. The terms language and studies are used as synonyms because of the culture, history, geography, economy and social life that are embedded in the language and as such cannot be separated from foreign language acquisition.

The discussion of the challenges drawn us to investigate the roles of French Government through its embassy in Nigeria.

Methodology

The author employs as a case study, the Federal College of Education, Okene where he is teaching French language between 2007 till date and Federal College of Education (Special), Oyo where his colleagues is teaching French language since 2017. Unstructured interviews were carried out and data were content analyzed over a period of four consecutive years. It must also be clearly stated that while this study is a philological exercise that focuses on the history, geography, economy and social life that are encapsulated in the language, it should be clearly stated that such a study cannot be divorced from foreign language acquisition. The discussion of the challenges leads to investigate the role of French Government through its Embassy in Nigeria.

Jaiswal and Vasilieva (1989) while evaluating the study of another language, confirmed that, it (i.e. another language) as:

A means of gaining access to the other culture and while learning the language, the students should not only learn a new code for expressing his thoughts but also acquire knowledge new to him, obtain new information, by which his general level of education increases.

It should be noted that the course contents of the French language are very important and that is why in the teaching of French language, the linguo-cultural aspect is of great value and must constitute an essential aspect of the course contents of the lesson taught.

The point we are trying to drive at here is to call the attention of the language policy makers, the stakeholders and education enthusiasts to the various challenges facing those learning and also those teaching French as a foreign language at the two selected colleges of education and to possibly proffer solutions to these problems.

The French Language as a World Language

French is the second most widely learned foreign language after English, and the fifth most widely spoken language in the world. French is also the only language, alongside English, that is taught in every country in the world.

The language dates back to roughly 150,000 years ago. However, all the linguistics evidence dates back to around 6,000 years ago, when writing began (<https://www.wondriumdaily.com>). Consequently, the major history of language is discovered through guesses and written evidence that is much newer than the era that the linguists study.

The language is considered as universal in the world due to the fact that the original lingua franca was spoken by people across a range of countries around the Mediterranean, and so the term has stayed on as a catch-all for any language spoken across more than one culture or community. French is a modern-day lingua franca, and boasts many more speakers than its Mediterranean namesake.

French is at the moment a foreign language in Nigeria. By characterizing the French language in Nigeria in this way, it means it is a language which should be termed as indigenous to another country (Wikipedia). In a nutshell, it is a language which a great majority of educated Nigerians do not speak or need at all, and which almost all uneducated Nigerians know nothing about. It is also a language learnt in the four walls of the classroom and spoken mostly by French teachers and students in French classes. Thus, French is not a means of communication among large numbers of Nigerian. There was never a time the writer has seen a gathering such as wedding or naming ceremony where the programme of event is anchored in French. Apart from this, there is no known Nigerian home where the medium of communication is in French.

Before considering the enormous logistic problems confronting the French language teaching in Nigeria, it would be useful to establish one or two facts concerning the so called French language teaching in Nigeria which might represent an hypothetical ideal in a total programme of teaching of foreign language.

Challenges of French Language Acquisition in Nigeria

The challenges militating against the first-hand French language acquisition in the two Nigerian Colleges of education used as case studies are dependent on several interrelated factors.

First and perhaps the most critical is the availability of teachers trained to teach the language especially in the post France/Francophone countries era. It was discovered that a lot of French teachers were trained on scholarship in the late 1980s in France when the economic and political situation were okay. Thus, of recent, it was discovered that the orientation has changed from scholarship to a money-oriented capitalist economy.

In some cases, some of the lecturers teaching this course are not well trained, probably perhaps they are university graduates who do not possess enough professional qualities or skills to effectively carry out the teaching task. Some of them that are even

trained for instance the B. A. (Ed) or B. Ed degree holders in French do not have the competence and the necessary courage to teach the language.

The second problem, a critical one as it were, is the non-availability of recent books, software materials and audio-visual materials as well as linguo-cultural materials designed specifically for use with students and teachers from Africa, primarily for Nigeria with a wide variety of linguistic, ethnic and sociological environment that are learning the teaching of French as a second official language in Nigeria. One must not forget to mention that most of the materials packaged in the two colleges library lacked recency thereby making the students to have an access to recent books in all disciplines of the language.

Furthermore, the French Embassy, representing the interest of the French government in Nigeria has not been proactive nowadays in promoting the teaching and learning of 'their' language and culture in Nigeria. The two colleges lack current French books or books in French, journals of modern European languages, and periodicals. Available books are those ones supplied in the past forgetting the fact that it is highly difficult to get standard French books in Nigerian market and bookshops. It was discovered that the books found in the library shelves are remnants of French books like "France Afrique", "Practical French", Français 5 textes et activités, 'Contact', 'Studio 100' etc. These books contain ideology, culture, content and tradition associated with French people and Francophone Africa neglecting the Nigerian culture which make the content to be considered as abstract to the Nigerian learners. All these are impediments to the effective means of teaching the language in Nigeria. French language books would be more useful to Nigerian students if the contents therein take into consideration the Nigeria situation while writing their books.

Another factor militating against the teaching of French in the two colleges we have chosen as our case studies is motivation for learning a foreign language. Considering this factor, we have internal and external factors. For the external factors, these include the learners' attitude, his parents and his society. Considering the internal factor, that is the ability of the learner to put into practice what he had already learnt in class and the influence of the teacher also plays an important role. Now the above postulation calls for proper scrutiny. Take for instance a foreign language learner like that of French must be interested in learning the foreign language (note the use of definite article 'the' (le/la), as it differs from an indefinite article 'a/an' (un, une).

Assessing the mode of admission in the two colleges used as case studies, a lot of students find themselves in the department of French by chance, that is to say not intentionally. Over a period of eight to ten years, the author has randomly conducted unstructured interviews among the new intakes into the French unit after the cancellation of the pre-NCE French programme on why they choose French language as a course and the reply is either 'I applied for 'ENG/SOS' but they gave me 'FRE/ENG' or 'I wanted to come

in for ENG/CRS', but I did not have the requirements'. In the last ten years, this unstructured interview has shown that less and less of our intakes, have an interest in the French language "offered" them, albeit on a platter of gold! Thus, the complexity now arise at the point when a student or learner who never experienced the learning of French before now finds himself or herself in a situation where he/she is to learn the foreign language (French) just for three year without the pre-knowledge. It becomes problematic and once the interest is lacking, it obviously becomes quite difficult for the teacher to instill the knowledge.

Another problem raised here has to do with parents. In a prestige society like Nigeria, no parent wants to see his child reading French but lucrative courses like engineering, law, medicine etc. The belief of the parents is that it is only a lazy child that pursue the course like French. Thus, this mentality discourages most of the students to come for the course because of the ignorant of most of the parents. And since the parents are considered as microcosms of the larger society, it is what they dictate that the society often follows.

Let it be clearly stated that one of the requirements of the ministry of external affairs for future career diplomats in Nigeria is a degree in a foreign language French, German, Portuguese, Chinese etc. To say the least, a lot of French graduates works at the aviation, airports, police, paramilitary, multinationals and embassy to mention a few.

The research carried out signifies that so many students are discouraged from learning French as a second language because of the financial constraints. This is because a large sum of money is needed to pursue the course most especially when they get to two hundred level. Here, according to the NCCE Minimum Standard, a student of French is expected to spend maximum of twelve weeks at the francophone environment to enable them get exposed to how the native speaker speaks the language. Before 1993, students of French in colleges of education travelled to various francophone countries like Niger Republic and Togo for their immersion programme but nowadays the venue has shifted to the Nigeria French Language Village, Ajara Badagry.

The statement made by Sulieman and Ibrahim (2017:66) attest to this when they maintain:

In the early sixties, scholarship was given to both students and French teachers to go to France. This was to encourage them to study the language.

The immersion programme was not without its benefits and as further capture in the National Commission for Colleges of Education Minimum Standard. The linkage was extremely beneficial for the French language studies. The Alliance Française periodically sent teaching materials, audio-visual and software for the teaching of the language while the Department

was constantly informed of all new development as far as teaching and learning of French as a second language, conferences and workshops etc.

Also, the attitude of the community towards French as a second official language is equally the role played by the target language in the community. If that language is highly valued as being the expression of a respected culture or society, or if it is a major means of communication in the world abroad or if it is a language which plays adequately no role in the lives of most members of its citizen. Odunuga (1997) had opined that Africa will continue to play its role in the forging of a world civilization and African government international bodies have a significant role to play. That role remains the funding of education. Virtually, all our colleges of education are starved of funds.

Conclusion

However, all hope is not lost considering the utterance credited to Igonor (2011) where he maintained that:

...for Nigeria to enter a relation of mutual benefits with the nations, it is imperative, at least to some extent, for her to communicate with these countries in their own official language-French.

Igonor (2011), however reminds us of the vital role this language plays while he opines that “French language in fact promotes global communication in all spheres of life-education, commerce religion and politics”.

Conditions for the most successful completion of such courses are the student’s motivation, the frequency of lesson and the level of available technical equipment like (slide, soft-ware, audio-visual aids, projector that projects native speaker voices) one should note that cd players and other electronic gadgets have taken over the role of tape-recorders. Going for language immersion programmes means going to locations where the language is being spoken by the native speaker.

Also, the infrastructure such as school buildings-classrooms, language, laboratories, resource centre etc. are not adequate as required. Where they are available, some are not put in proper shape to enable them function. However, each language is structured differently, and the different structures offer users different suggestions to meaning according to Kayode (2012:11) he maintains:

So, when we learn our first language our brain/mind ‘tunes into’ the way the particular language works, and we learn to pay attention to particular cues to meaning that are most helpful. When we meet a new language, our brain/mind

automatically tries to apply the first language experience by looking for familiar cues.

Learning a foreign language is like developing new understandings about the particular cues to meaning that the new language offers and that differ from those of our first language.

The French Embassy in Nigeria has a huge part to play in making sure that the teaching of French language does not die an unwilling death. A lot of awareness on the people's culture and language should be embarked upon so that the teaching of the language will gain more ground in all our colleges of education.

Teachers of French language in Nigeria should continue to benefit from exchange programmes, access to French journals, periodicals and various teaching materials, especially linguo-cultural materials.

The Embassy of France should be more proactive and effective in justifying their diplomatic relationship with Nigeria by relating more with all colleges where their language is being studied and learnt.

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