



SOME CHALLENGES OF FRENCH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES.

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ABSTRACT

The French language is one of the very well recognized international languages in the world currently. Its usage, although only official in France, Belgium, Switzerland, some parts of Canada, and in ex-colonies of France and Belgium on the African continent, is not relegated in some notable Anglophone countries, such as Nigeria. On the contrary, the French language occupies a pride of place in the scheme of things in Nigeria as far as international languages are concerned. While we do not see the need to (re)amplify the fact that Nigeria is surrounded by francophone African countries, the veracity of the fact that the French language was proclaimed as the second official language in Nigeria by the late former Head of State, General Sani Abacha in 1996 is however not in doubt. This move by the late Nigerian Head of State lends credence to the importance of the French language in the country. Well before this proclamation nonetheless, the French language had started being taught as a discipline in Nigerian universities. In fact, the first set of French graduates from Nigerian universities dates back to the early sixties. However almost six decades after, we are currently faced with a plethora of setbacks as far as French language teaching is concerned in Nigerian universities. These challenges range from absence of functional laboratories, overcrowded classrooms, admission of students who did not initially intend to study the discipline and poor public perception. The primary effect of these identified challenges sees majority of French language graduates being poorly trained and unable to live up to the expectations emanating there-from. While we do not pretend to have highlighted all the issues having to do with the challenges of French language education in Nigerian universities, we however hope that pertinent questions would have been raised and foreseeable and implementable solutions provided with these perspectives that we hope to tackle in this paper. Our methodology in this paper is hinged on the psychological approach, on our over a decade experience as University French teachers and on students' performance at the examinations.

Keywords: French language, Nigeria, universities, learning, motivation, classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

French language learning, as significant an activity as it is in the world today, has sadly been on a downward slide in Nigeria these past two decades. The learning process has

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unfortunately been left somewhat on the shoulders of university teachers, a responsibility that is, more than ever before, proving a hard nut to crack. French language as a subject in most of the few primary and secondary schools where it is taught in Nigeria has not shown any promise of rising beyond the level of “bonjour”, “comment ça va” and “ je m’appelle ...” just to mention a few of the very basic French language words and phrases. Stated differently, barring a handful of Nigerian students of French in our universities with a francophone background (some of them have spent a significant part of their childhood in francophone countries such as le Gabon, la Côte d’Ivoire, la République du Bénin, le Togo, le Caméroutn and la France just to mention a few), the Nigerian university French teacher has had, and is still doing so, to brace up to the challenges of taking the Nigerian student of French from the level of “ débutants” (beginners) to an enviable level where he/she can express him/herself in French. While Mokwenye decries the seemingly weak presence and the near non-existent teaching of French language in our Primary and secondary schools, Elaho admonishes the Nigerian Government to show more commitment towards the teaching and learning of the language, especially in our primary and Secondary Schools. Yaroson, on his part, criticizes the inability of a good number of French graduates who find it difficult to orally express themselves using the French language. For this reason, French language teaching and learning in Nigerian universities is submerged in a myriad of challenges which we intend to analyze in this study. Yaroson is of the opinion that every language is, firstly, spoken before being written. He adds that the French language teacher should prioritize teaching students of French language while laying great emphasis on its oral feature as a tool of communication and not to privilege its written aspect. At this point two salient questions readily come to mine; For example, why do most University French language students perform better in written than in oral French? In what ways do the identified factors affect the performance outcomes before and after graduation? This paper concludes with some strategic suggestions towards solving most of the challenges militating against the learning of the language.

1. Some Factors Militating against a More Effective French Language Learning in Nigerian Universities.

Nigeria has well over fifty universities, with approximately half of them teaching the French language as a full fledged discipline. There exist a lot of factors militating against a loose-limbed French language learning process in Nigerian universities classrooms; we are, however, hinging our analyses on three fundamental angles of these challenges:

1.1. Forced Admission of Students with Zero Knowledge of French

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. Explaining this trend, Mokwenye (2012 : 5) has this to say:

We had reached a critical stage in the history of French language in Nigeria, when the country was at the verge of not doing French anymore at the university level having already lost French at the secondary school level (...). For this reason, the Nigerian university French lecturer has been very proactive in adopting a strategy that has allowed for an improved level of student intake in our various (French) departments. French Departments in our universities take in candidates with or without a prior knowledge of French and bring them up to the required standard during the four-year period of their study for the degree.

This move coupled with the ever increasing number of candidates who are successful in the universities entrance examinations, has led to a situation of having more students than necessary for a French language class. Osawaru and Osawaru (2014 : 38) explain further on this :

[Dans la plupart des universités nigérianes, les étudiants du français sont reçus sans une connaissance préalable de la langue française.
In most Nigerian universities, French students are admitted without any previous knowledge of the French language.] (The translation is ours)

This consequently leaves the Nigerian university French teacher with a mountain to climb. The French teacher therefore finds it almost impossible to carry every student along and to make sure each and every student gets the required attention in order for the desired results to be achieved in the course of the learning process. In most cases, it becomes “survival of the more gifted students” as they are practically left on their own to fine-tune strategies aimed at improving on the impact the teacher would have had on them. Undoubtedly, this explains why Departments in Nigerian universities turn out a “few of the good”, “very many of the bad “and a “handful of the ugly”.

1.2. Poor Public Perception

Even with its over five decades of its existence in Nigerian universities as a course of study, the French language is still relatively unknown to many as a course of study in its own right. As French teachers in a Nigerian university (the University of Benin, Benin-City), it is shocking that many parents and a good number of university admission seekers in the humanities are always startled to hear that the French language is studied as a core discipline in our universities. They, consciously or unconsciously, had hitherto believed its learning and usefulness in an Anglophone country like Nigeria cannot stretch beyond the confines of primary and secondary school education. Apart from its supposed obscure nature amongst some Nigerians, French language as a course of study in Nigerian universities still grapples with a poor public perception. Accordingly, very few informed parents advise or encourage their children or wards to study French in the university. The fear or the mentality behind this state of mind vis-à-vis the study of French language in Nigerian universities is as a result of the seeming negative impression and perception that surrounds the language. Firstly, there is this erroneous believe that French graduates, upon leaving the university, are constrained to take up teaching jobs with poor remuneration. Owing to the poor paying status of such teaching jobs, there has obviously been a follow up mentality that the study of French is better left to the female students, who, perhaps, are better suited for the teaching profession in primary and secondary schools. This explains the feedbacks gotten from newly admitted students and some not so learned parents who are in the habit of asking their children admitted to study French language questions like: Where the students can work upon graduation? Someone who studies law becomes a “Barrister”, someone who studies medicine becomes a “Doctor”, someone who studies accounting becomes an “Accountant” and so, what will someone who studies French become after graduation? Some parents have this prejudice against their children studying French language at the university as they feel uncomfortable having to tell their friends that their child is studying French at the university?

This poor public perception also affects the newly admitted French students upon commencement of lectures. The negative mind-set most of the newly admitted French students have towards the study of the language compels the Nigerian university French teacher to initially switch from being a teacher to being a “motivational speaker”. It is at this stage the teacher finds it imperative to disabuse the minds of such students of preconceived ideas about the study of the language. To achieve this, the French teacher, amongst other things, counsels the newly admitted students on the possibilities of fully understanding the subject, of being able to speak the language fluently upon graduation and being able to graduate with good results. Stated differently, the teacher demystifies

the myth on the impossibility of successfully studying French in our universities. The teacher also sees it as his/her duty to ensure that the students are predisposed to the fact that a lot of well-paid and good teaching jobs abound for the French graduate, especially one that obtains a very good result. Such job opportunities include, but are not limited to, well paid teaching jobs, translation and interpretation jobs, vacancies with Nigeria foreign missions, openings with foreign and international companies and organizations within and outside Nigeria. It is also common knowledge that, with the world becoming more and more of a global village, employers, especially those with international business interests and outlook would rather settle for prospective employees with proven knowledge of a second international language, aside the English language. With the geographical location of Nigeria on the world map and with the ever increasing influence of France on the international scene, the French language conveniently tops the list of credible international languages in this category.

On this, Ofor, Iroegbu and Casimir (2020 : 64) have this to say :

L'acquisition de la compétence de s'exprimer en français est d'un grand avantage dans l'emploi, particulièrement, sur la scène internationale, parce que la connaissance du français offre une excellente occasion de travailler dans des entreprises et des établissements français au Nigéria ainsi qu'à l'étranger.

The acquisition of the competence to express oneself in French is a big advantage in employment, particularly, on the international scene, because the knowledge of French offers an excellent opportunity to work in French establishments and enterprises in Nigeria and abroad. (The translation is ours.)

Another perspective of viable job opportunities of French language graduates could also be found in the Nigerian Military and the Nigerian Police force. The Army, Air force, Navy and Police accord special and due considerations for French graduates in their recruitment exercises. This is hinged on, among other factors, the numerous collaborative efforts they have with neighboring Francophone countries in the West African sub-region and beyond in their quest to ensure the territorial integrity of the Nigerian State and to combat external aggression. Such motivational talks not only reduce poor performances on the part of the students, but they also dissuade the newly admitted French students from throwing-in the towel either by switching their course of study or abandoning it completely. Pet talks of this nature should conventionally or otherwise serve as a prelude to the main teaching process which can be divided into two very vital parts; written and oral French.

2. Compulsory Oral Classes for all Levels

Granted that as the newly admitted French student get more and more immersed in the study of the language, the need for the teaching process to be conducted with the French

language being the language of instruction becomes more and more evident. Conversely, experiences have shown that the written aspect of the course has been taken more seriously than the oral aspect, and this trend does not aid the objectives of the programme. This regrettably leads to a situation where some French graduates, turned out even with good grades, find it extremely difficult to express themselves in the language. The student's expertise in written French is no doubt important, but equally pertinent to being an all-round French graduate in an Anglophone country like Nigeria is one's ability to reasonably and meaningfully express him/herself in oral French. This constitutes the very essence and first noticeable evidence of one's formation in the language. Accordingly, eighty percent of courses under this discipline are directly or indirectly linked to the written form of the language. Although courses such as "Composition Writing in French", "Written French Comprehension", "Introduction to French Grammar" and "Introduction to African Literature in French" (for higher levels) have been evidently designed for the formation of French students, they are however geared towards the written part of the language. On the other hand, very few stakeholders, if any, would question the fact that the fulcrum of French language learning is embedded in the oral/spoken part. For as Yaroson (2009 : 45) puts it:

Nous avons constaté dans notre enseignement que beaucoup d'apprenants, surtout des débutants, ont des problèmes à s'exprimer surtout à l'oral. Toute langue étant d'abord parlée avant d'être écrite, l'enseignant doit entraîner les apprenants à l'oral en leur donnant la parole en classe et en les encourageant à parler.

We have observed in our teaching that a lot of learners, especially beginners, find it difficult to express themselves orally. Given that a language is first and foremost spoken before being written, the teacher should equip the students orally by giving them the opportunity to speak in class and also encouraging them to do so. (The translation is ours)

To tackle this lopsidedness and prevent an unwanted situation where French graduates with palpable and striking deficiencies are turned out, some French Departments in our universities have intentionally gone about making French oral classes compulsory, more penetrating and more result oriented. Tijani (2005 : 63) explains further on this :

La langue doit être enseignée dans sa fonction d'objet de communication et non celle de matière scolaire.

Language should be taught as a tool of communication and not just as an academic subject. (The translation is ours)

At the University of Benin, Benin-City, Nigeria for example, in order to buttress the relevance of spoken French to students' formation and to ensure a polymorphic training of students, two oral courses each are on the list of courses designed for first and second year students. Each of the courses sees the lecturer come up with interesting conversational topics that are most likely to introduce the students to French words adjudged not to be incongruous, but most suitable for routine and everyday use,

although it is envisaged that, in due time, the students will be introduced to more technical and complex words and sentences. Such topics are also carefully chosen with regards to the level of the students, while bearing in mind topics with tendencies to provoke and lead to an unbridled, passionate but decent participation in the discussion on the part of the students. Having settled for a topic, the teacher, kick starting the process, gives a brief expository on it using aptly selected words that the students can easily relate with and that can spur them into making speeches of and on their own on the subject matter. Subsequently, it is expected of a sedulous teacher, in anchoring such a course/class to take notes ony and to allow the students more time and freedom in expressing themselves. The teacher essentially intervenes towards the end of the class by, amongst other things, pointing out the grammatical errors, bad combination of words and wrong or faulty pronunciations. The teacher also has the duty to suggest to the students better and more appropriate expressions that they should or could have used in expressing their opinions on the subject matter.

With new topics every class day, and barring slight changes based on exigencies and regular needs and performance evaluation of the students by the teacher, this process is expected to be a normal routine. Such classroom participation, performance and improvement on the part of the students are enhanced and taken more seriously by the latter when they are made to realize from the very beginning of the course that they will be made to take continuous assessment tests and the main exams orally and on individual basis. In order words, for the continuous assessment test, the students, on individual basis, are made to sit before the course lecturer(s) in an office to listen/reply, answer questions and to give a brief talk on one of the topics treated in class. It is however imperative to note here that this applies to first year students, as second year students are expected to speak on topics somewhat different from what they had previously treated in class, they are therefore expected to be spontaneous. Marks are subsequently awarded to the students based on their respective performances in continuous assessment tests.

Examination contexts have even more far reaching positive effects as the students are made to appear before an oral exam panel handled by teachers different from the ones that taught them the course. Needless to say that marks are also awarded on individual basis based on the students performances. Some of the positives of this method are listed here below:

- a) Knowing full well that they will be scored on their individual performances, students do not “hide behind the shadows” of their classmates, the hitherto weak students see no alternative other than to convince themselves that their obtaining

good grades in the course (spoken/oral French) depends on them giving the learning of the language all the needed attention it deserves and that the quest is achievable if they put their minds to it.

- b) Some very shy students find it extremely difficult to speak French in and outside the classroom because they are afraid to make mistakes. This platform will help them do away with such mentality and to embrace the indubitable feature of competence in spoken French in the life of a French graduate.
- c) This aspect of spoken French in French language learning in our university complements the whole process of French language learning, without which the process could be seen to be incomplete.
- d) With this process, French students in our universities will be better equipped for the onerous task that lies ahead of them. Their expertise could be required in areas such as translation, interpretation, business linkages, teaching, diplomatic relations between Nigeria and other Francophone countries, to mention but a few.

3. Motivation

Disciplines such as French language learning in an Anglophone country like Nigeria would have students do better with some steps taken towards motivation. Provision of more recent and up-to-date laboratory equipment, textbooks, excursion and training trips to Francophone countries such as Benin Republic, Togo, Senegal, Cameroun, Côte d'Ivoire and France will inspire the students to give their all to the learning of the language. Beyond the proclamation of French as the second official language in Nigeria by the late former Nigerian Head of State, General Sani Abacha, the Government should open its doors for more collaborations between Nigerian university French teachers and their counterparts in Francophone countries around the globe. Apart from the foreign contacts that would bring the Nigerian French teacher to an international circle of French teachers for better results, this will afford French teachers in Nigerian universities the much needed exposure to current teaching texts, aides and methods. In a similar vein, the French Government should increase her efforts towards making the French language to be more accepted and spoken, especially in an Anglophone country like Nigeria owing to her leadership role on the African continent and even the world at large. For as Elaho (2015: 2) puts it :

First and foremost, the Federal Government should muster the political will to implement the 1996 policy that made the teaching of French compulsory in Secondary schools (...). The French Government should as a matter of policy, see the development of French language in

Nigeria as a responsibility it should share with the Nigerian Government. It should no longer sit on the fence or adopt a paternalistic attitude in its dealings with French teachers in Nigeria.

Furthermore, the French Government should renew and broaden her programmes of sponsoring exceptional French teachers and students to France for short stay programmes in French. This will serve as a genuine form of motivation especially for the students. This strategy will in turn boost the awareness, consciousness and seriousness in learning French amongst Nigerians.

CONCLUSION

Our thoughts in this paper have partly been hinged on the Nigerian university French teachers' approach to teaching French language to Nigerian university French students, many of whom are new to the language. We posited to a large extent that the Nigerian university French teacher is faced with the dual daunting responsibility of tackling the relatively unknown nature of the French language as a course of study to some would-be Nigerian university students and the fact that most of the students who eventually end up being admitted to study the language did not opt for the discipline. On this, the Nigerian university French teacher finds it necessary to disabuse the minds of the new intakes and get them to see the advantages of studying the language at that level. Secondly, the Nigerian university French teacher should place premium on the spoken aspect of the language as this step guarantees to a reasonable extent the turning-out of well-trained Nigerian graduates of French. That is not to say the written aspect of the language should be left to suffer.

We would also like to conclude by reaffirming that French language learning in Nigerian universities has come a long way, spanning almost six decades. This number of years notwithstanding, a lot of efforts and attention still need to be accorded to the learning process. For instance, the admission process should be targeted at candidates with an arty-fatty disposition to their academics. Despite decades of the French language's presence in Nigeria, it has sadly not attained the much desired and expected level of wide acceptance amongst Nigerians. Having enumerated some of the challenges of teaching French language at the university level in Nigeria and suggesting viable solutions, our study also made a strong case for deep and concerted efforts by the Nigerian and French Governments towards making the study of the French language more attractive, less complicated and obscure and, more importantly, more remunerating. France should take more of the initiative in the area of provision of more recent teaching aides and materials. The French Government should do more on the

training of French teachers/lecturers in France; this initiative should also include students' excursions to French countries.

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