CHALLENGES FACING NIGERIAN UNDERGRADUATES LEARNING FRENCH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

By

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Abstract

French language is one of the very well recognized international languages in the world currently. It is an official language in France, Belgium, Switzerland, Canada and in African Francophone countries. It is equally a prominent language in most countries of the world. More so, French language occupies a pride of place in the scheme of things in Nigeria as far as international trade is concerned. This study examined the challenges facing Nigerian undergraduates learning French as a foreign language, with a case study of Lagos State University of Education (LASUED), Epe Campus, Lagos State and Tai Solarin Federal University of Education, Ijagun Campus, Ogun State. The objectives were to investigate linguistic, pedagogical, environmental, and psychological challenges and to suggest solutions. A qualitative research survey was used with 100 students (50 from each University) and data were collected through virtual questionnaires and analyzed using the statistical chi-square test design. Findings revealed that students struggle with grammar, pronunciation of words, wrong mindset towards the learning of French and lack of adequate teaching materials. This research recommendation includes provision for a serious and rigorous Language Immersion Programme (LIP), modern teaching methods and facilities, and confidence-building activities.

Keywords: French, Learning, Teaching, Challenges, Nigerian undergraduates

Introduction

French is one of the most widely spoken international languages, ranking as an official language in over 29 countries of the world. In Nigeria, French is expected to be considered officially as the second official language due to Nigeria's geographical proximity to Francophone countries. French Language learning, as significant as it is in the world today, has sadly been on a downward trend in Nigeria in the past two decades. The teaching of French as a subject has unfortunately been left somewhat on the shoulders of those that have one certificate or the other

in it and that are not even willing to teach it, particularly in our secondary schools, a perception that is, more than ever before, needing a hard nut to crack. Students' performance in French Language as a subject in most universities in Nigeria needs to show more of perfection especially in their oral competence. Stated differently, comparing 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 Gabon, Côte d`Ivoire, République du Bénin, Togo, Cameroun and France (just to mention a few), are fair in oral competence, the Nigerian University French Teachers are making efforts to brace up with these challenges. Yaroson (2016) criticised the inability of a good number of French graduates who find it difficult to orally express themselves using French Language. For this reason, French Language learning in Nigerian universities is submerged by a myriad of challenges which the researchers intended to explore in this study. The challenges include linguistic barriers, inadequate exposure, and poor teaching method, wrong mindset of students and lack of learning resources.

Statement of the problem

Learning a foreign language can be challenging but with rewarding experience. When it comes to learning French, there are often a myriad of challenges that can impact a student's ability to effectively learn the language. These challenges stem from linguistic challenges- grammar and pronunciation, pedagogical challenges- inadequate and ineffective teaching materials, environmental challenges-oral competence opportunities and exposure to French media, cultural stereotypes- seeing learning French as a wasted effort/only for the elite, and even lack of improvement strategies- language laboratories and result oriented immersion programmes. English is the official language in Nigeria, and it is widely used in government, education, and business. As a result, many Nigerians view English as the language of prestige and power, while other languages, including French, are often marginalized and seen as less important. This could also lead into the feelings of inadequacy and inferiority when using French, as well as lack of motivation to continue learning the language. To better understand how these challenges impact the learning of French in Nigeria and how to further curb the menace, it is important to examine them one after the other.

Objective of the study

This study sought to:

1.Identify some pre-conceived ideas about French language in Nigeria

2.Examine teaching materials available for French language in Nigeria

3.Analyze admission into higher institutions of students with zero knowledge of French Language in Nigeria

4.Examine practice opportunities available for French Language learners in Nigeria

5.Assess the availability of laboratories and Language Immersion Programmes for French Language in Nigeria

Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between pre-conceived ideas about French Language and the learning of French?
2. What is the relationship between lack of teaching materials and the learning of French language?
3. What is the relationship between admission of students with zero knowledge of French and the learning of French?
4. What is the relationship between lack of practice opportunities and students' oral skills?
5. What is the relationship between the provision of language laboratories/immersion programmes and the learning of French Language?

Research Hypotheses

Ho$_1$: There is no significant relationship between pre-conceived ideas about French language and the learning of French.

Ho$_2$: There is no significant relationship between lack of teaching materials and the learning of French language.

Ho$_3$: There is no significant relationship between admission of students with zero knowledge of French and the learning of French.

Ho$_4$: There is no significant relationship between lack of practice opportunities and students poor oral skills.

Ho$_5$: There is no significant relationship between the provision of language laboratories/immersion programmes and the learning of French Language.

Theory

This study is based on Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory that are found appropriate for this study. In the 1970s and 1980s, American linguist Krashen and Spanish educator Terrell formulated five acquisition hypotheses, with the "i+1" input hypothesis being particularly influential. Krashen`s theory emphasizes the significant role of input in second language acquisition and has inspired foreign language education. He believes that human can only acquire comprehensive input to acquire language. That is, the only way people can acquire language is through comprehensive language input. The so-called intelligibility of language input, expressed by the formula, "i+1", where "i" represents the current level of the language teacher, and "1" represents the knowledge that exists slightly than the existing level of the language teacher. If the language input they obtain is far beyond the learner`s existing level, "i+2", or close to or even lower than the learner`s existing ability level "i+0", then they do not obtain enough comprehensive input or too difficult to understand. There are 3 conditions in this theory (language input must be comprehensive, language input must be massive and sufficient, and that language input should be interesting and relevant).

On the other hand, Vygotsky (1987) studied the dynamic social surroundings which indicate the connection between teacher and the child. Moreover, he focused on the social, cultural and historical artifacts which play a pivotal role in the children`s cognitive development as well as their potential performance. The study concludes with the idea of Williams & Burden (1997) that

socio-cultural theory suggests that education should be associated with learning, to learn and making learning experience meaningful and relevant impact to the learner. The study also suggests some pedagogical implications and offers teaching and learning practices in relation to social-cultural theory. Krashen emphasizes the comprehensible input for language acquisition, while Vygotsky stresses the importance of social interaction in learning.

Judging from the point of view of Adegboku (2013), the inadequacies of foreign language teaching are traced to the failure of the teacher's adaptation to the current digital education. He stressed that one of the greatest challenges facing the teaching and learning of a foreign language teacher is the issue of adapting him or herself to the current environment created by the diverse development of information and communication technologies in a globalised world. This view noted by Adegboku, is not practically an inhibiting factor to the effective teaching and learning of a foreign language as proven by our research. Learners of foreign language on campuses are our youths that are so versatile in the use of technology. Ekwerre (2021) in her opinion expressed that a foreign language teacher has to accustom him or herself with the use of the new tools like his learners, for both to arrive productively at attaining the pedagogical behavioral objectives.

Methodology
The study adopted a quantitative survey design found suitable for a research of this nature, consisting French students of Lagos State University of Education, Epe Campus, Lagos and Tai Solarin Federal University of Education, Ijagun, Ogun State, Nigeria.

Sample and Sampling Technique
A sample of 100 students selected using stratified random sampling across levels (50 students from each institution) was chosen for the study.

Research Instruments
The instruments used for data collection were self-prepared questionnaire and structured interview.

Method of Data Collection
Virtual questionnaires were sent to students through WhatsApp group using their representatives.

Method of Data Analysis
Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and chi-square tests.

Validity and Reliability of Instruments
The instruments were validated by experts and tested for reliability using the test-retest method (r = 0.82).

Result and Analysis
Demographic Data
Respondents were between age range of 15–20 (55%), with more females (58%) than males (42%).

Analysis of Research Questions

Research Question 1: What is the relationship between pre-conceived ideas about French language and learning of French?

Table 1: Relationship between pre-conceived ideas about French Language and learning of French.

S/N	Items	Mean	S.D	Decision
1	I think French is only for the elite.	1.89	0.77	Disagree
2	I believe French is a difficult language to learn.	3.64	0.48	Agreed
3	My attitude toward French affects my willingness to learn it.	3.39	0.58	Agreed
4	I am discouraged from learning French because people said it's a waste of time.	3.12	0.77	Agreed
5	My pre-conceived belief about French has influenced my level of interest and performance.	3.58	0.51	Agreed
	Weighted Mean	**3.12**		

The table shows that respondents disagree with the first question and agreed with the rest having a weighted mean value of 3.12.

Research Question 2: What is the relationship between the lack of teaching materials and learning of French?

Table 2: The relationship between the lack of teaching materials and learning of French Language.

S/N	Items	Mean	S.D	Decision
6.	Lack of adequate French textbooks affects my understanding of the language.	3.60	0.58	Agreed
7.	Audio-visual materials (tapes, videos, apps) are rarely used in class.	3.18	0.79	Agreed
8.	The absence of modern teaching aids makes French lessons less effective.	3.20	0.96	Agreed
9.	Teachers struggle to demonstrate correct pronunciation due to lack of materials.	3.45	0.50	Agreed
10.	Inaccessibility to quality instructional materials improves my learning of French.	1.80	0.68	Disagreed
	Weighted Mean	**3.05**		

The table shows that respondents agreed with the first four questions and disagreed with the last, having a weighted mean value of 3.05.

Research Question 3: What is relationship between admission of students with zero knowledge of French and learning of French?

Table 3: The relationship between admission of students with zero knowledge of French and their performance.

S/N	Items	Mean	S.D	Decision
11.	I am admitted into French programme without background in French.	3.66	0.47	Agreed
12.	Students with no prior knowledge of French find it difficult to cope initially.	3.19	0.77	Agreed
13	Lack of basic knowledge of French slows down my class progress.	3.57	0.53	Agreed
14	Remedial or introductory courses should be provided for beginners.	3.16	0.73	Agreed
15.	Admission of students with zero French background negatively impacts the learning atmosphere.	3.25	0.70	Agreed
	Weighted Mean	**3.37**		

The table shows that respondents agree with all the questions with weighted mean value of 3.37.

Research Question 4: What is the relationship between lack of practice opportunities and learning of French?

Table 4: The relationship between lack of practice opportunities and learning of French.

S/N	Items	Mean	S.D	Decision
16.	There are few opportunities to speak French outside the classroom.	3.48	0.50	Agreed
17.	Lack of French clubs or associations affects language fluency	3.45	0.65	Agreed
18.	Students rarely participate in French-speaking events or excursions.	3.05	0.90	Agreed
19.	The absence of native speakers' interaction limits real communication practice.	3.24	0.59	Agreed
20.	Regular practice sessions would significantly improve my confidence in speaking French.	3.27	0.71	Agreed
	Weighted Mean	**3.30**		

The table shows that respondents agreed with all the questions with weighted mean value of 3.30.

Research Question 5: What is the relationship between provision of language laboratories/immersion programmes and learning of French?

Table 5: The relationship between provision of language laboratories/immersion programmes and learning of French.

S/N	Items	Mean	S.D	Decision
21.	My school lacks a well-equipped French language laboratory.	3.60	0.58	Agreed
22.	Immersion programmes in Francophone countries enhance language acquisition.	3.18	0.79	Agreed
23.	Listening to native speakers in a language lab improves pronunciation.	3.20	0.96	Agreed
24.	Students perform better when exposed to real-life French environments.	3.45	0.50	Agreed
25.	Establishment of French laboratories and exchange programmes will not improve learning outcomes.	1.80	0.68	Disagreed
	Weighted Mean	**3.05**		

The table show that respondents agreed with the first four questions and disagree with the last, having a weighted mean value of 3.05

Testing of Hypotheses

Hypothesis I

Ho_1: There is no significant relationship between pre-conceived ideas about French language and learning of French.

Table 6: Chi-square analysis of significant relationship between pre-conceived ideas about French Language and learning of French.

Item	SA	A	D	SD	Total	x^2cal	x^2tab	Df	Remark	Decision
1	5	10	54	31	100					
2	64	36	0	0	100					
3	43	54	2	1	100	347.679	21.026	12	Significant	Reject Ho_1
4	31	55	9	5	100					
5	59	40	1	0	100					
Total	**202**	**195**	**66**	**37**	**500**					

The calculated x^2cal was 347.679 while the x^2tab was 21.026 at 0.05 level of significance; therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. This implies that there is significant relationship between pre-conceived ideas about French language and the learning of French.

Hypothesis II

Ho$_2$: There is no significant relationship between lack of teaching materials and learning of French Language.

Table 7: Chi-square analysis of significant relationship between lack of teaching materials and learning of French language.

Item	SA	A	D	SD	Total	x^2cal	x^2tab	Df	Remark	Decision
6	65	30	5	0	100					
7	37	49	9	5	100					
8	49	31	11	9	100	281.895	21.026	12	Significant	Reject Ho$_2$
9	45	55	0	0	100					
10	0	15	50	35	100					
Total	196	180	75	49	500					

The calculated x^2cal was 281.895 while the x^2tab was 21.026 at 0.05 level of significance; therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. This implies that there is significant relationship between lack of teaching materials and learning of French language.

Hypothesis III

Ho$_3$: There is no significant relationship between admission of students with zero knowledge of French and learning of French Language.

Table 8: Chi-square analysis of significant relationship between admission of students with zero knowledge of French and learning of French Language.

Item	SA	A	D	SD	Total	x^2cal	x^2tab	Df	Remark	Decision
11	66	34	0	0	100					
12	36	52	7	5	100					
13	59	39	2	0	100	47.915	21.026	12	Significant	Reject Ho$_3$
14	32	56	8	4	100					
15	37	54	6	3	100					
Total	230	235	23	12	500					

The calculated x^2cal was 47.915 while the x^2tab was 21.026 at 0.05 level of significance; therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. This implies that there is significant relationship between admission of students with zero knowledge of French and learning of French Language.

Hypothesis IV

Ho$_4$: There is no significant relationship between lack of practice opportunities and learning of French.

Table 9: Chi-square analysis of significant relationship between lack of practice opportunities and learning of French.

Item	SA	A	D	SD	Total	x^2cal	x^2tab	Df	Remark	Decision
16	48	52	0	0	100					
17	54	37	9	0	100					
18	34	46	11	9	100	50.290	21.026	12	Significant	Reject Ho$_1$
19	32	60	8	0	100					
20	39	52	6	3	100					
Total	**207**	**247**	**34**	**12**	**500**					

The calculated x^2cal was 50.290 while the x^2tab was 21.026 at 0.05 level of significance; therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. This implies that there is significant relationship between lack of practice opportunities and learning of French.

Hypothesis V

Ho$_5$: There is no significant relationship between provision of language laboratories/immersion programmes and learning of French.

Table 10: Chi-square analysis of significant relationship provision of language laboratories/immersion programmes and learning of French.

Item	SA	A	D	SD	Total	x^2cal	x^2tab	Df	Remark	Decision
6	65	30	5	0	100					
7	37	49	9	5	100					
8	49	31	11	9	100	281.895	21.026	12	Significant	Reject Ho$_2$
9	45	55	0	0	100					
10	0	15	50	35	100					
Total	**196**	**180**	**75**	**49**	**500**					

The calculated x^2cal was 281.895 while the x^2tab was 21.026 at 0.05 level of significance; therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. This implies that there is significant relationship between provision of language laboratories/immersion programmes and learning of French.

Conclusion

This research concludes by reaffirming that French Language learning in Nigerian universities has come a long way, spanning almost six decades. With this number of years notwithstanding, a lot of efforts and attention still need to be accorded to its 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 facing learning French Language at the university level in Nigeria and suggesting viable solutions, the study also made a strong case for deep and concerted efforts by the Nigerian and French Governments towards making the study of 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 learning aides and

materials. The French Government should do more on the training of French lecturers in France; this initiative should also include students` excursions to French countries.

Recommendations

Recommendations are as follows:

1.   Provision of French Language laboratories.
2.   Use of modern and interactive teaching methods.
3.   Encourage result oriented immersion/exchange programmes.
4   Increase access to French media.
5.   Build students' confidence through supportive teaching.
6.   Explore the role of technology.

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