

## **ENHANCING THE TEACHING OF FRENCH LANGUAGE IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS**

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### **Abstract**

The role of French Language in the economy of Nigeria as a nation is of great importance. More importantly, as Nigeria is surrounded by francophone countries. The integration and co-operation of these countries together with Nigeria in order to strengthen bilateral relationships, address socio-politico, cultural and other international issues are of great and paramount importance. All these may not be effectively realized without an effective communication amongst the countries with French language. We are of strong view that if French Language is strengthened and effectively taught in primary schools, the objectives highlighted above will, to a large extent, be achieved. The strengthening of the teaching of modern European languages such as French at the primary school level forms a strong foundation for the acquisition of the language at both secondary and tertiary levels. In this work therefore, we shall critically examine the place of French as a foreign language in Nigeria as a nation, its benefits to the country, effective methods of teaching French language in primary schools, roles of the teachers and learners respectively towards enhancing French Language teaching in primary schools. Keneman and Elizabeth Pedoya's theory of poem as a veritable tool for the teaching of

French phonetics is examined in this work and also suggested as means in enhancing the teaching of French language in primary schools. It is strongly believed that if the theory of poem propounded by these theorists is adopted and implemented in primary schools, the teaching of French language in primary schools will be greatly enhanced.

## **Introduction**

In Nigeria, learning of a foreign language or a second language goes with a lot of challenges, considering over four hundred (400) indigenous language that exist in the country. However, this does not by any means suggest that the acquisition of a second or more than one language is impossible. Language Education is a process by which an individual develops the skills for effective value to the society (Adebayo 2002). In his view, Corder (1982:107) explains that language is better learnt at infancy and childhood when the child is acquiring other skills and much more other knowledge about the world.

The National Policy on Education (2004:10) clearly states that "Government appreciates the importance of language as a means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion, and preserving of cultures, that every child shall learn the language, of the immediate environment (L.I).

Furthermore, in the interest of national unity it is expected that every child should learn one of the three Nigerian languages: Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba. For smooth

interaction with neighbouring countries, it is desirable for every Nigerian to speak French language.

Accordingly, French shall be compulsory in primary and junior secondary schools but, Non- vocational elective at the Senior Secondary School”. This was the position of the government regarding French language as stipulated in the National policy on education.

In this paper therefore, we shall examine the benefits of French language to the country, the methods adopted in its teaching and government’s roles and policies in ensuring an effective teaching and learning of French language in our primary schools.

The policies in the country in principles actually make provision for multiple languages acquisition. This is not only as a result of the multilingual nature of the country, but because the country is hedged by so many francophone countries. This undoubtedly accounts for the inclusion of the following in our educational policy: Mother Tongue (M.T.), Nigerian Languages (N.L.), which are basically, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, and official languages which are English and French languages. It is pertinent to note that these languages are opened to all Nigerian pupils and students for study, except for the foreign languages which are considered optional.

## **Theoretical framework**

This paper is based on the impressive works of these great theorists, Gleason, Keneman and Pedoya whose

works and contributions have in no small measure elevated phonetics as a branch of linguistics.

Gleason in his work titled “Problèmes phonologiques dans l’apprentissage des langues, brings to light the challenges encountered in learning of a second language. According to him the mastery of phonology of a particular language is very fundamental in the learning of language:

[...] certains réussissent même à la langue à perdre la maîtrise de leur langue maternelle, sans pour autant maîtriser la seconde. Puisque des nombreuses années passées à écouter et à parler une conduisent pas l’adulte à une maîtrise adéquate il est évidente que la phonologie doit être d’une étude particulière dans l’apprentissage d’une langue (272).

However, it is pertinent to note that children naturally learn languages easier than adults. In view of this, Gleason suggests the following reason: Children are less obsessed than adults in the acquisition of vocabulary.

Pedoya and Keneman on their part are of the opinion that the art of listening and the system of reading in the classroom does not really seem easy in the course of constant repetition of texts so desired by the poet. (63). Leclair believes that reciting of poems allow for easy internalizing of the international phonetic alphabets as well

as the understanding of certain grammatical expressions intended to teach (64). Leclair further explains: «*dans un cours de langue, un tel poème permettra de vivre à l'étudiant un apprentissage de la phonétique non comme un à-côté plus ou moins ennuyeux de son apprentissage linguistique...*»

### **The Place of French Language in Nigeria**

A critical study has revealed that little or no interest is shown in the study of French language which is considered as the country's second official language (O.L.).

Although Section 55 of the 1999 constitution stipulates that “the business of a house of Assembly shall be conducted in English, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made therefore”. Consequently, giving by this provision, the official languages of the country are no longer limited to English and French languages.

For the purpose of this paper therefore, we shall group the languages into: Mother Tongue (M.T.), Second Language (S.L.) and foreign Language (F.L.). We shall briefly examine the first two kinds of languages and dwell more on the foreign languages.

**Mother-tongue (M.T.):** This is the first language of communication which a child from infancy acquires, his/her geographical location and or socio-linguistic background notwithstanding.

**Second language (S.L.):** Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as contained in the Education policy are regarded as Second Language (S.L.).

Linguistically, a second language is the language which a child learns outside his immediate environment which is used for administration or for formal purposes. It is a language that is outside the sociolinguistic background or origin of the child.

**Foreign language (F.L.):** A foreign language is not the Mother Tongue of any group in the country where it is taught. Soyoye, (2001:64).

Adebayo (2002:114) describes it as an exogenous language with which a child does not share any socio-cultural, socio-political and socio-economic affinity. It is pertinent therefore to note that giving by the definitions, English, French, Arabic, German, Portuguese, Spanish and Russian could be referred to as foreign languages in Nigeria.

Meanwhile, English, French and Arabic are some of the most prominent foreign languages taught in public schools. With the government declarations on the importance of French language as enshrined in the national policy on education, a lot of testimonies have been recorded in schools.

- i. The language curriculum has been re-organized in the interest of teaching and learning of the language at various levels.

- ii. At tertiary institutions, departments of French and European languages, studies carry out research on the way to enhance the learning and teaching of the language.
- iii. Government has been able to establish a French language village in Badagry, Nigeria which serves as a resource centre for students of French language at the tertiary level.
- iv. At junior secondary schools, the language is taught as a core-subject. Although it, is a non-vocational Education at the senior secondary school.

However, in spite of these remarkable records, it is sad to note that little or nothing has been done to enhance the teaching of French language in our primary schools.

It is imperative therefore to highlight some of the factors that militate against the effective teaching of French language in our primary schools.

1. Poor implementation of the policy on Education that French should be the second c£ official language of the country. We see a situation where not all the schools have a space for the teaching of French language in their time tables.
2. Inadequate Teachers: Not only do we experience shortage of man power, but it is sad to note that only few out of the available French teachers are proficient in the language.
3. Problem of mind set: Most parents do not encourage their children to study this language because they have

the notion that French language is not profitable, perhaps because of their level of exposure about foreign languages.

4. Problem of fund: This is a major factor as most of the schools suffer financial challenges. The provision of teaching aids that facilitate the teaching of French language is inadequate due to lack of fund. There are no laboratories for the language and even the few schools where French laboratories seem to exist, lack facilities for teaching the language.
5. Poor curriculum planning: Although, heads of schools have started recognizing the inclusion of French language in schools' curriculum, however, there is a problem of insufficient attention and teaching duration for the subject.
6. Non inclusion of French language in certificate examinations. It is sad to note that as a result of the less priority given to French language it is not included in certificate examinations, such as primary six (6) examinations, common entrance examination, etc.

### **Roles of teachers and pupils in enhancing the teaching of French language**

We wish to submit that it is very pertinent to take cognizance of the fact that in Nigeria, before the learner can effectively go into the study of any given foreign language, he already has a deep knowledge of English Language which is Nigeria's official language and the



learner's native language which is often referred to as mother tongue.

This phenomenon brings about Language interference in the course of learning a foreign Language. Therefore, it is very imperative for the teacher to help the learner overcome this interference occasioned by fluency of the languages the learner is already used to. This is why there is high tendency for learners of French language to confuse some French words with English words with resemblance as presented thus: “une journee and “a Journey”. As soon the teacher comes up with the French word, the first word that readily comes to mind is the latter just because they look alike. On the contrary, “une journee” simply means “all day”.

Consequently, language interference is a major factor which influences the learning of French language in our primary schools. I recall with great sense of humour how one of my earlier pupils then as a beginner in the teaching profession, pronounced wrongly the French expression “et vous” meaning “and you” as “Ebu”. Incidentally “Ebu” is the name of a town in Delta State.

Therefore, the teacher should take into account this factor as it has a way of hindering the leaning of French language as well. The learner is also encouraged to think in the language being taught so as to guide against what we refer to as “mot á mot” translation which is the word for word system of learning.

As a step further towards ensuring the overcoming of language interference, when learning a language, the following scholars employed theory of language interference in their various works.

Kwofie (1985) based the theory of interference in his work titled: “teaching of French language in Africa”. It is an examination of linguistic problem with special reference to French phonology.

In his (work which serves as a guide for teachers and learners, Ajiboye (2004:3) speaks of various ways by which the teaching and learning of languages can be effective. Politzer (1981) comments on the problems of interference of the mother tongue with a second language or even a foreign language:

[...] The most important and the most obvious problems occur if the language to be learned is English or French in the case where it utilizes a phoneme which has no counterpart in the learner's language. Another set of problem arises if the sound of English does not exist in the learner's native language but it is utilized in different way closely related to the problem at home, are those which are best analyzed as a result of a neutralization process in the native language: a contrast between phonemes maintained in some positions is completely lost in others. Another type of pronunciation mistake is the close substitute sound. In most instances the mistake is caused by substituting a native sound

very similar or almost identical to the English phoneme which will cause little trouble or misunderstanding, (5)

Beverley Inger (2006), observe that this language interference, particularly the mother tongue, also affects syntax and semantics. They opine that:

[...] In learning a language it is necessary to have realistic goals. Unless you begin in your infancy it is very unlikely that you will ever have a perfect command of a language. Nowhere is this more true than pronunciation. Even if you start in your teens, and go to live in the country concerned, it is likely that you will have some traces of foreign accent all your adult life ... (186).

Kaneman and Pedoya on their part strongly believe that employing poems in the teaching of sounds is a veritable tool for an effective learning of language sounds. According to them a constant repetition of the poem by the pupils will bring about a perfect mastery of the particular set of sounds the poem desires to teach. It is important to mention here that there is an inseparable relationship between sounds and language. Language community refers to language as a combination of speech symbols linked together by concatenation (Asadu and Ezeani 2009:210). When we talk of sounds, we refer to phonemes. A phoneme is the smallest unit of sound of an alphabetic language. For example, *cat* has three phonemes /k/, /se/ and /t/ while *may* has just two /m/ and /ei/. The learner therefore, is encouraged to have what we refer to as phonemic awareness (P.A).

Kaneman and Pedoya, suggest that phonemes such as: [á], [é], [y], [u], [3], and [3] can be taught and learnt with a simple poem. We are therefore, convinced that a simple poem such as this will help to teach the problematic sounds identified in the above phonemes.

J'ai faim.

Mama, donne moi du pain.

Tu vois, moi j'ai faim.

Mets toi á genoux,

Et dis moi bonjour.

Bonjour Papa.

Bonjour Maman.

Moi, j'ai faim.

J'ai très faim.

Bonjour ma fille

Ma petite fille.

Si tu as faim.

Prends ton pain,

Sur la table.

Et dis moi «a table».

## Recommendations

1. It is hereby recommended that French language be made compulsory in all the primary schools as this is the basic educational state of the child. There is no doubt that this will enable the child to learn the language with ease. Again the duration of the learning period should be extended to five (5) times in a week.

2. Policy makers should include in their curricula excursion to French village or francophone countries for better exposure of the pupils.
3. Nigerians should be properly, enlightened and re-oriented on the importance and values of foreign languages, not just for their children, but for the society at large.
4. Government should establish some monitoring agencies such as Education marshal etc. that will ensure full implementation of the teaching, and learning of French language in our primary schools.
5. No primary school should exist without French language laboratories with all its necessary In facilities for the effective study of the language such as internet facilities, computers, audio visual aids etc.
6. Keneman and Pedoya's method of poem in teaching phonetics should be adopted by schools as to ensure the enhancement of the learning of French language in Primary schools

The regular training of teachers on the current trends of teaching and learning of French language should not by any means be jettisoned.

And in funding of the teaching and learning of French language in schools, remuneration of teachers should be given a paramount priority so as to make for an effective and better teaching and learning of the language.

## **Conclusion**

There is no individual or group of individuals that can do without the use of language as a means of an effective communication. In this paper therefore, we have been able to highlight the socio-economic, socio-political and socio-cultural benefits of French language in a fast growing economy as Nigeria.

We have been able to disclose the nature of French language in Nigeria primary schools and the basic factors bedeviling the learning of this language in our primary schools. And that the system of poem suggested by Keneman and Pedoya be adopted as an effective means of enhancing the learning of the Language.

Therefore, the government is called upon to do everything within its power to addressing all the areas of deficiency highlighted by the presenter of this paper, in order to ensure that French language is effectively taught and learnt in our primary schools, so as to ultimately ensure progress and development of our immediate community, Nigerian economy and the society at large.

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