



JOURNAL ^{OF} FUNCTIONAL MANAGEMENT

**LEAD CITY UNIVERSITY
I B A D A N**

Volume 4 No. 1 April, 2011

ISSN 2141-3711

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PERCEIVED PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH FRENCH LANGUAGE LEARNING AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENT IN NIGERIA.

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Abstract

Learning a new language comes with its own set of problems. Even the brightest of students can find the new language to be difficult and hard to understand. This study adopted descriptive survey design in studying the problems associated with French language learning among secondary school students. Three hundred and fourteen (314) students were randomly selected and agreed to participate in this study. These students were made up of 146 males and 168 females. Their ages range from 12-17 years with mean of 14.24 and standard deviation of 6.18. Two hundred and eighteen (218) were in junior secondary III while ninety six (96) were in senior secondary school. All of them had French as one of their subjects in school. The respondents indicated six problems associated with French language acquisition.

Keywords: *Foreign Language, Learning*

Introduction

On a personal level, learning a second language takes people out of their imprinted mindset and exposes them to the mores and customs of an entirely different group of people. Their view of the world expands beyond blurbs on the nightly news and into a deeper understanding of how other people think. In terms of community, learning a second language will also increase understanding and compassion for other cultures. This becomes a powerful tool in fighting stereotypes and bigotry. Young children especially secondary school students are encouraged to acquire a foreign language in school. One of such foreign languages is French. French language exists as Arabic under the National Policy on Language Education as language options at both the Junior and Senior Secondary School levels. However, students do not find the acquisition of this language easy.

Learning a new language comes with its own set of problems. Even the brightest of students can find the new language to be difficult and hard to understand. Theories have profile reasons for this difficulty. Some of the

theories established for foreign language acquisition consider the learner's innate faculties of greatest importance; others highlight the capacity of the environment in shaping language acquisition while others offer a combined approach with both environmental aspects and learner traits (Lightbown and Spada, 1999:31). For example, behaviourists consider imitation, practice, reinforcement and habit formation fundamental to SLA. However, the habits formed in FLA are believed to interfere with the habits needed in SLA (Lado, 1964 in Lightbown and Spada, 1999: 34). The Contrast Analysis Hypothesis predicts that the learner will easily acquire the target language structures if the learner's FL and the target language are similar, but will have difficulty if the structures are different as in the case of French language in Nigeria.

Steven Krashen (1982) proposed a theory consisting of five hypotheses which he asserted was consistent with research findings. Since its introduction, the monitor model has been influential in SL practices. In the first hypotheses cited in Lightbown and Spada (1999: 38-40), Krashen asserts that adults learning a SL gain knowledge of the language in two ways: 'acquisition' and 'learning'. Just as a child naturally picks up a FL, adults *acquire* language which is understood, and *learn* by studying rules and forms. Krashen believes that only acquired language is then accessible for fluent conversation and that learning cannot be transformed into acquisition. Krashen says that the *acquired* system accounts for fluency while the *learned* system performs as an editor or 'monitor' to make small changes to the acquired system's production. He points out that learners only use the monitor when they know the rules and have the time to find them.

He agrees with observations made that, much like children learning a FL, SL learners acquire characteristics of the language in predetermined sequences regardless of the order which they may be learned in the classroom. Rules which seem simple and which are easily explained will not necessarily be the ones the learner learns first. For example, advanced learners often neglect to add an -s to third person singular verbs. Krashen argues that the only way to acquire language is by having exposure to comprehensible input or input which is slightly beyond the learner's level of competence. He believes that the affective filter hypothesis can explain why some adults, while exposed to ample comprehensible input, still do not attain high levels of competence. Accessible language input can be blocked by things such as student' motives, attitudes and emotional stress, and Krashen refers to this as the 'affective filter'. When the learner is calm and motivated, the filter will be down and language can be learned more easily. When the learner is anxious, unmotivated or self-conscious the filter will be up and will block acquisition.

Connectionists are opposed to the LAD hypothesis. They credit the environment and input more than the learner's innate ability, and assert that

what is inherent is merely the capability to learn. By having a countless number of exposures to the target language, learners eventually amass a solid comprehension. Learners develop strong neural connections from hearing the language in specific contexts repeatedly (Lightbown and Spada, 1999: 42).

In the view of interactionists, Long (1983), for example, believes that modified interaction is necessary for input to be comprehensible. He says that learners need a chance to interact with other speakers so that they adjust their speech to suit the learner's level of understanding. According to Long, "there are no cases of beginning-level learners acquiring a SL from native-speaker talk which has *not* been modified in some way" (Lightbown and Spada, 1999: 43). He says that research has shown that native speakers regularly modify what they say when speaking to non-native speakers in prolonged conversations.

A series of prediction studies (Dufva & Voeten, 1999; Service, 1992; Service & Kohonen, 1995) revealed that native language (L1) phonological-orthographic skills and phonological memory, together with the ability to compare L1 syntactic-semantic structures, predict foreign language learning in students. Sparks et al. (1995) indicated that FL aptitude and native language spelling were the best predictors of FL grade, whereas Sparks et al. (1997) found that FL grade and FL word recognition were predictive of FL oral and written proficiency in high school students. Further studies provided support in favour of the hypothesis that academic proficiency in a student's first language was predictive of success in FL learning (Humes-Bartlo, 1989; Olshtain, Shohamy, Kemp, & Chatow, 1990). It is worth noting that a large body of studies has demonstrated the crucial role of verbal memory in FL learning (Baddeley, Gathercole, & Papagno, 1998; Cheung, 1996; Gathercole, Hitch, Service, & Martin, 1997; Masoura & Gathercole, 1999; Miyake & Friedman, 1998; Palladino & Cornoldi, 2004; Service, Simola, Metsanheimo, & Maury, 2002; Thorn & Gathercole, 1999). Also, phonological awareness has been shown to be strongly related to FL learning (Comeau, Cormier, Grandmaison, & Lacroix, 1999; Hu, 2003).

The main objective of this study was to examine the problems associated with French language acquisition as perceived by the secondary school students. Other objectives include;

1. To identify the problems associated with French language acquisition as perceived by the secondary school students.
2. To determine if there is a significant difference the problems associated with French language acquisition as perceived by male and female students.

Research Questions

Two research questions were raised and answered:

1. What are the problems associated with French language acquisition as perceived by the secondary school students?
2. Is there a significant difference the problems associated with French language acquisition as perceived by male and female students?

Methodology Design

This study adopted descriptive survey design in studying the problems associated with French language learning among secondary school students in Ado Odo/Ota Local Government Area of Ogun State, Nigeria.

Subjects

Three hundred and fourteen students were randomly selected and agreed to participate in this study. These students were made up of 146 males and 168 females. Their ages range from 12-17years with mean of 14.24 and standard deviation of 6.18. 218 were in junior secondary III while ninety six were in senior secondary school. All of them had French as one of their subjects in school.

Instruments

A survey instrument was developed and used in this study. Six problems were identified-lack of people to communicate with, lack of textbooks and teaching materials, lack of interest /motivation, shortage of teachers, discrepancies between native language and French. Problem Associated with French Learning (PAFL) had test retest reliability of 0.86 after three weeks interval and Cronbach Alpha of 0.76.

Results

Research Question 1

What are the problems associated with French language acquisition as perceived by the secondary school students?

Table 1: Problems associated with French language acquisition as perceived by the secondary school students

S/N	Perceived Problem	N	%
1	Lack of people to communicate with	268	84.54
2	Lack of textbooks	213	67.19
3	Lack of teaching materials	114	35.96
4	Lack of interest /motivation,	304	95.89
5	Shortage of qualified teachers	246	77.60
6	Discrepancies between native language and French.	214	67.50

The respondents indicated six problems associated with French language acquisition. The analysis in table 1 on revealed that 84.5% identified lack of people to speak French with at home and during school hours, 67.4% indicated lack of textbooks while 35.9% indicated lack of teaching materials. The highest problem reported was lack of interest and motivation to learn French this accounted for 95.89%, 77.60% shortage of qualified teachers and 67.50% reported discrepancies between native language and French as a challenge.

Research Question Two

Is there a significant difference in the problems associated with French language acquisition as perceived by male and female students?

Table 2 Summary of Chi Square

Variation	N	Df	X ²	Sig
Male	146	5	1.86	>0.05
Female	168			
Total	314			

The finding revealed no significant difference in the problems associated with French language acquisition as perceived by male and female students at $X^2=1.86$, 5degree of freedom and $p=>0.05$.

Discussion and Recommendations

With the importance of learning a foreign language so clear, the question becomes one of how to do it. Luckily, the same culture that makes the skill necessary also makes it easier than any other time in history to become fluent in a new language.

The following options may be explored:

Traditional teaching: Universities, community colleges, and several private organizations offer traditional language classes during holidays. The range to choose from may depend on the cost because they will almost always charge fees for classes and materials. The need for many people to learn a second language has turned this field into a thriving industry. Secondary school students may complement classroom learning with this.

Internet: More than just Web sites, there are many Web 2.0 and social media technologies that provide language lessons, audio guides to pronunciation, feedback from native speakers and fellow students, and much more. These includes videos on YouTube and other sites; podcasts; and online messaging and chat tools such as Skype which facilitate connection and contact between students and teachers. Using these resources allows students to proceed at their own pace and within their own time frame. Best of all, most of these are free.

Immersion: The most complete immersion would be to actually move to the country, but that's not always a possibility. In most large cities, however, there are cultural centers, discussion groups, and other organizations that usually welcome the curious to join them. At first, communication may be awkward and stilted. However, with persistence and attention, the sounds and meanings of a language sink in and become internalized. This method of learning a language usually stays with a person longer.

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