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EFFECTS OF PRINT ACCESS AND PRINT EXPOSURE ON FRENCH VOCABULARY ACQUISITION BY SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

by

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Abstract

A number of studies have shown that second and foreign language learners acquire vocabulary through reading, but only relatively small amounts. However, most of these studies used only short texts, and measured only the acquisition of meaning, and did not credit partial learning of words. This study investigates whether an extensive reading program can enhance lexical knowledge. In this descriptive study, a survey of 133 students from selected secondary schools was carried out. The findings revealed that there was a positive relationship between number of books, print access, minutes engaged in reading per day by students and vocabulary acquisition. It was recommended that in spite of the present scarcity of French books, French teachers can make do with what is available and still achieve positive results. There could also be an aggressive recruitment of French teachers for the Senior Secondary School level to join the few ones on the job. The Government should also evolve a policy of book-writing through the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC). Books should also be produced cheaply. French should be given greater attention by the Government, while departments of French should constantly engage in sensitization programmes. Also, parents should give their children adequate encouragement to study French.

Introduction

The importance of French in Nigeria derives from the multi-faceted relations that the country maintains with French-speaking countries, and the Francophone world. French has always been mentioned in the National Policy on Education as a foreign language to be taught, apart from English, in secondary schools. This policy, though not vigorously pursued until quite recently, underscores the relevance of French and its place not only in the curriculum, but also as a foreign policy tool.

Considering the fact that French is a foreign language and an elective subject in the Secondary School Curriculum, both Junior and Senior, one must expect that there will be problems of diverse kinds: linguistic, psychological, pedagogical, socio-cultural, etc, especially as pupils do not readily find models to interact with on daily basis.

In the Nigerian educational system, seldom is French introduced at an early age. It is only officially part of the curriculum at the secondary school level where the average age is about 12

years. Unfortunately, as Girard (1972:12) notes, the age, 'correspond, d'après les psychologues, à la fin de la période la plus favorable pendant laquelle la faculté d'imitation de l'enfant est considérable.' (According to psychologists, this corresponds to the end of the most favourable period during which a child's ability to imitate is great.) (Translation is mine).

Other problems may be linked to the students, the teachers, pedagogical materials and even the educational system. Teachers, for example, need to keep abreast of developments in education and language learning and use more attractive methods, including various multimedia tools.

Several indigenous research efforts have over the years been made to resolve the challenges that arise in the acquisition of the French language in Nigeria and arrest the plummeting fortunes of French. Nigerian scholars and educationists have classified the problems broadly as socio-linguistic, economic, political and institutional. For example, according to Emordi (1986:24), several factors

combine to make it impossible for secondary school learners who have studied French for five or more years to express themselves or communicate in simple everyday French. Focusing on course books, he observes that they are not usually well adapted to the conditions and needs of Nigerian students. Generally set against foreign socio cultural requirements, the course materials do not correspond to the sociolinguistic background, realities and needs of the students. Whatever the case, one of the challenges of French language teaching/learning is the general language situation of learners. It is a known fact that the Nigerian society is irretrievably heterogeneous. Students from diverse ethnolinguistic or cultural and socio-economic backgrounds are exposed quite early to several languages, including their mother tongues and English. Kwofie (1985:37) cites this factor and the lack of adequately adapted resources as adversely affecting the teaching of French in Nigeria and in Africa generally. Some scholars attribute the dearth of students and the dismal performance of learners to unqualified teachers. This situation is aptly captured by Echetabu (1985:26), when he talks of lack of adequate quality and quantity of teachers of French.

The learner is confronted with the task of not simply acquiring new information (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, etc.), but also acquiring symbolic and idiomatic elements of a foreign cultural and ethno-linguistic community. The words are not just new ones for already familiar concepts and things, neither are the grammar and pronunciation just different ways of expression. To be able to use the new language effectively, the learner has to learn, constitute and stock complex elements in his language repertory for recall. This implies an imposition of another culture on one's own life space.

Using a new language, in this case French implies the prior acquisition or possession of relevant and indispensable elements of its vocabulary. Vocabulary development involves listening to, reading, writing, and speaking the language. The benefits of increasing vocabulary knowledge are improved comprehension and the ability to produce quality communication (Al-Jarf, 2006). The more words or items of the vocabulary of a language one knows, the deeper

one's understanding and knowledge of the language and greater is his/her ability to infer meanings (Al-Jarf, 2006).

Horst (2005) divides research in the field into two strands: studies on incidental vocabulary acquisition and studies on acquisition through extensive reading.

Extensive reading exposes learners to "large quantities of material within their linguistic competence" (Grabe and Stoller, 2002: 259), which is, at the same time, pleasurable. There are several reasons why it is so attractive to develop language knowledge (and more specifically vocabulary) through extensive reading. To mention a few, it is considered a "pedagogically efficient" (Huckin and Coady, 1999: 182) approach, as two activities – vocabulary acquisition and reading – occur at the same time. This approach facilitates learner autonomy, can be very pleasant and motivating, provides learners with the opportunity to meet words in their context of use, (Thornbury 2002), increases sight vocabulary (Coady, 1997; Nagy, Herman and Anderson, 1985).

In fact, Nation (2001: 155) argues that "the use of reading and other input sources may be the only practical options for out of class language development for some learners," especially in FFL contexts. This study therefore examined the effects of print access and print exposure on French vocabulary by secondary school students.

Statement of the Problem

Much of the research that has been done on foreign language vocabulary acquisition and instruction has been at the microscopic level. Researchers in language acquisition have often looked at the very first words children learn, or at how children acquire words in a restricted domain; similarly, research on vocabulary instruction has often concentrated on the task of determining which of several methods is best suited to teaching the meanings of a relatively small set of words; very few studies have tested competing methods using more than 100 words. Such an approach cannot by itself give an accurate picture of vocabulary acquisition, or form the basis for making decisions about the most effective approach to vocabulary instruction. A more comprehensive view of vocabulary, one that takes the overall size and nature of the task into consideration, can assess the relative importance of what is called incidental vocabulary learning and explicit vocabulary instruction for proper

articulation. Access and exposure to print have been shown to be an important factor influencing students' reading behaviour by inducing students to read more (McQuillan, 1998a; Krashen, 2004). Access to books is difficult in many homes due to poverty level. This situation might be acceptable if books were luxuries, like silk scarves. But educators contend that access to books should be seen as a necessity, alongside access to food, shelter and health care. Indeed, numerous studies have shown that making books more accessible to children — through libraries, reading programmes, and home libraries can produce marked improvements in their reading behaviour. Reading habit is essential to improve grades. Invariably when a child does not have access to books at home and sometimes in school, the performance definitely suffers. Students learning French as a foreign language that do not have access to books may suffer poor acquisition of French vocabulary.

The problem in many developing countries like Nigeria is that governments lack either the financial resources or the political will to meet their citizens' educational needs. In response, parents, mostly, low income earners have to pay for their children's education themselves. This has made buying of books not a priority.

However, most students studying French as a foreign language require textbooks to acquire vocabulary. Alternatively, school libraries should provide books for students but many of these schools have no functional libraries. Students will have to rely on class notes that are not often adequate. This inaccessibility or non-exposure to print materials may have negative impacts on students' vocabulary acquisition capability. The present study, therefore, seeks to determine how secondary school learners of French in Nigeria acquire the vocabulary of the language through access to published materials and print exposure.

Objectives

The main objective of this study is to determine the effects of print access and print exposure on French vocabulary acquisition of secondary school students. Other specific objectives include:

1. To determine if there is a relationship between the number of French books owned by students and their level of vocabulary acquisition.

2. To determine if there is a relationship between the number of French books students read and their vocabulary acquisition.

3. To determine if there is a relationship between the number of minutes engaged in reading per day by students and their vocabulary acquisition.

Research Questions

1. Is there a significant relationship between the number of French books owned by students and their vocabulary acquisition?

2. Is there a significant relationship between the number of French books students read and their vocabulary acquisition?

3. Is there a significant relationship between the number of minutes engaged in reading per day by students and their vocabulary acquisition?

Methodology

Design

This study adopts a descriptive research design in achieving its objectives. A descriptive study design is one in which the primary goal is to assess a sample at one specific point in time without changing the behaviour or conditions or trying to make inferences or causal statements.

Subjects

Two local government areas of Lagos state and two schools were randomly selected each where 37 participants were randomly selected from each of the schools. This was made possible with the help of sample frame in form of attendance registers provided by class teachers. These participants were drawn from low income, urban high schools in Lagos metropolis. All participants were students of French as a foreign language with a Nigerian language as their first language. An initial sample of 147 students took part in the study; however, several students failed to complete one or more of the surveys and tests, reducing the number to 133.

Instruments

Three measures were used in the study. They were administered over a period of three days and took less than 15 minutes each to complete:

- i) **Vocabulary Recognition Test.** A Vocabulary Recognition Test consisting of 112 items selected from words appearing in students' current, self-

selected reading materials was administered. This list was derived by asking each student to write down two words from their current pleasure reading French book, whose meaning they did not know (excluding proper nouns). The researcher then selected the most frequently occurring of these French words for the recognition checklist. By this method, words from the independent reading level of the group as a whole could be used, while ensuring some variability in word difficulty.

ii) **Author Recognition Test.** Pilot testing indicated that print exposure checklists used in previous studies of adolescents were too difficult for this population, and thus a new test, the Author Recognition Test (ART), was constructed using authors from the collection of books available to students in the classroom and school libraries. There were a total of 15 items on the ART, 8 real author names taken from books available to students in their classroom and school libraries, and seven false names taken from the editorial board of *Applied Psycholinguistics*. As with the Vocabulary Recognition Test, the final score was determined according to the formula used by West, Stanovich, & Mitchell (1993). Reliability of this measure proved to be acceptable (Cronbach's alpha = .72).

iii) **A Title Recognition Test** based on a similar set of books used for the author recognition test was also developed in a pilot phase of the study. However, it was found that reliability on the instrument was unacceptably low (Cronbach's alpha = .24), and it was thus not used in the final phase of the study.

Students were given a survey to gather their demographic information as well as additional data on their out of school literacy experiences. Students were asked their class, gender, the number of minutes they read French books per day outside of school, the number of books they owned, and the number of total French books in their home.

Results

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for Secondary School French Language Students (N = 133)

Variations	No	%	Mean	Median
Class				
JSSIII	45	33.8		
SSS I	46	34.6		
SSS II	27	20.3		
SSS III	15	11.3		
Gender				
Male	65	48.9		
Female	68	51.1		
Author Recognition			26	18
Minutes engaged in Reading Per Day			48	36
Books Owned			3	2
Books in the Home			18	8

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics from the three instruments used. The majority of students participating in the study were JSS III 45 (33.8%) and SSI 46 (34.6%), with an approximately equal number of boys and girls. While the mean and median scores for the Author Recognition test were 26 and 18, scores on the Vocabulary Recognition Test exhibited definite floor effects, even though the instrument was drawn from a list of books the students had available in their classroom libraries. The mean score on the ART was only 12 with a median score of 8. The average number of minutes per day, students self-reported reading French books outside of school was 48. The number of reported books owned and total number of books in the home was low. Students reported owning only an average of 3 French books, with the median being mere 2 books. The average number of books in the home was 18, with a median of 8. There was considerable variation in these measures as indicated by the standard deviations shown in Table 1.

Table 2 Correlations Among Variables (N = 133)

Variations	VR	AR	BH	BO	MRD
Vocabulary recognition	-				
Author Recognition	.42 ^b	-			
Books at Home	.28 ^b	.52 ^a	-		
Books Owned	.48 ^a	.46 ^a	.16 ^b	-	
Minutes Read Per day	.44 ^a	.51 ^a	.40 ^a	.54 ^a	-

a = p < .01, b = p < .05

Table 2 shows the correlation among all the main variables. Despite problems of clear floor effects in the print exposure and access measures, print exposure as measured by the Author Recognition Test still correlated significantly with the measure

of vocabulary knowledge, and even with the reported number of books owned and total number of books in the home. The vocabulary measure did not correlate with the number of self-reported minutes of out-of-school reading. As noted above, self-reported measures tend to suffer from social desirability effects. In this case, it appeared that students tended to report 20 minutes for the number of minutes they read outside of school, since this was probably the recommended number of minutes they were encouraged to read by their teachers.

Discussion

The findings revealed positive relationship between number of books, print access, minutes engaged in reading per day by students and vocabulary acquisition. The role that vocabulary knowledge plays in foreign language acquisition has long been neglected (Akpörherhe, 2002). However, vocabulary is currently receiving increased emphasis in the language teaching curriculum. This is due to several reasons, such as the influence of comprehension-based approaches to language development, the research efforts of applied linguists, and the exciting possibilities opened-up by the development of computer-based language corpora (Nunan, 1999: 103). Moreover, it is now increasingly pointed out that there is a reciprocal, well-documented relationship between vocabulary knowledge and access to French books. As Tozcu and Coady (2004: 473) point out, learning vocabulary is an important aspect of L2/FL acquisition and an academic achievement and is vital to reading comprehension and proficiency, to which it is closely linked. The problem of the dearth of French books has been with us for long in Nigeria. This has been aggravated in recent times by inflation, restrictions on the importation of foreign books, scarcity of enterprising, standard French printing presses and the scarcity of indigenous French writers. Without adequate books, French Studies are in jeopardy.

Recommendation and conclusion

In spite of the present scarcity of books, a well-read French teacher can make do with what is available and still achieve positive results. For example, in the area of essay-writing, he can guide the pupils by teaching them how to write

essay outlines on different topics. He can also teach grammar and reading by using materials from standard French books. In the case of translation, he can improvise too and use newspaper articles for practice. But that pre-supposes that he knows enough English to be able to teach French/English translation. Without adequate knowledge of both the source and target languages, one may not be able to make appreciable progress. It is in literature that one may envisage much problems as regards the scarcity of books, and even then the problem is not insoluble (Adesola, 2005).

There could be an aggressive recruitment of French teachers for the Senior Secondary level to join the few ones on the job at present. Government should also evolve a policy of book-writing through the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC). Books should be produced cheaply. If the government takes the initiative, it is sure that Nigeria has enough specialists to put their heads together to produce something that can be presentable to the West African Sub-region at least. French should be treated by government and all well-meaning patriots as "an endangered subject" and given adequate attention. Some parents have their share too in their nonchalant attitude to the progress their children make in learning French. Most times, students are not given adequate encouragement by their parents.

Compared to other component parts of the syllabus, French literature seems the most difficult. This is partly because, unlike other aspects of French, it is studied for the first time at that level. Moreover, poetry is often more difficult than prose in diction and imagery. However, with a sense of commitment, careful planning, and contextualization or domestication, literature can be most interesting and exciting even when there are no adequate books.

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Profile

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