

**PROBLEMS OF LEARNING FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN COLLEGES OF
EDUCATION AND UNIVERSITIES IN NIGERIA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY
OF ENGLISH AND FRENCH LANGUAGES**

Joseph Akanbi Adewuyi (Ph.D.)

Department of French, Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo, Telephone

Anthony Oladayo Bernard

Department Of English, Adeyemi Federal University of Education,

Roseline Adebimpe Adewuyi

ABSTRACT: *In this study, an attempt has been made to vividly unveil some areas that serve as barriers to easy and effective learning of French and English languages Colleges of education and Universities in Nigeria. It is evident that the teaching and learning of foreign languages in Nigeria, a country of diverse ethnic groups, are hard hit by series of problems. It is hoped that through various researches that highlight different aspects of the learners difficulties, their trauma will be greatly reduced. In view of this, we have made a comparative analysis of the problems and proffered possible solutions to help the teacher as well as the learners. Be it English as a second language or French as a second official language in Nigeria, both are foreign and must be considered as much. Pedagogical approaches are proposed in the paper to enhance the teaching of these languages in Nigeria.*

KEYWORDS: Learning Foreign Languages, Colleges of Education, Universities, Nigeria, English, French Languages

INTRODUCTION

Although English is popularly referred to as a second language in Nigeria, it is like French, a foreign language. Their status acknowledges the existence of another language that is the first language which is the mother tongue. As a matter of fact, in Nigeria, most learners already have as first language at least one of the several indigenous languages. The situation in Nigeria is therefore a complex one in view of its linguistic and ethnic diversity.

English language was considered as a language of colonization, oppression and slavery by virtue of its being the language of the colonial masters. With time, it gradually entrenched itself into every facet of our system because of the socio-political, economic and educational advantages derived from its use. It has now acquired the status of a second language, language of instruction and official language. In Nigeria, the English language is the official language and as pointed out by Awoniyi (1982) 'English is the language of commerce, of the high court as well as the medium of instruction in the upper

classes of primary school in some area...'According to Amosu (1982), French was introduced in Nigeria in the 50s to replace Latin. The reason for this introduction is manifold. French is spoken in several countries of the world. It is one of the languages used at the United Nations Organization and other international organizations. Nigeria shares common borders with four French speaking countries. Anyone who has the knowledge of French will, as opined by Elliot and Guvry (1940) 'be able to understand the people and what they have contributed to world thought and learning'. Martini (1996) also stated that learning French makes one to invest in the future of modernity of this country. Anyone who speaks French in Nigeria will be able to bridge the gap of communication between us and our Francophone neighbours. It is worthwhile to mention that French recently became the second official language of the country. Though many researches have highlighted difficulties associated with learning of foreign languages, not so much has been done to cover the different aspects of languages. This study is intended to expose and address the various problems from a practical perspective.

Notwithstanding the enviable position of these languages in our society, the problems, associated with their teaching and learning are numerous. These problems among others are mainly those of languages in contact, grammatical, semantic, phonological and socio-political problems.

PROBLEMS OF LANGUAGE CONTACT:

Language comes into contact when they are spoken side by side in the same environment. A lot of researchers have been carried out in this area. Among the consequences of language contact are borrowing, pidginization and they all constitute great problems to bilingualism.

Borrowing:

According to Ilori (1992), borrowing involves *the importation of items of one language into another. These items usually take the form of single words or short frozen idiomatic phrases which are incorporated into the diagrammatical system of the borrowing language.* (p54).

Both English and French have at one time or the other had contact with and borrowed words from Latin and Greek. Some of these borrowed words constitute a great deal of spelling problem for a second or foreign language learner. In English, for instance, words like 'curriculum' and 'memorandum' etc have their plural forms as 'curricula' and 'memoranda' respectively 'dilettante' and 'lied' become 'dilettante' and 'lieder' in plural. This is quite different from the general rules of pluralization which is done by the addition of 's' in English.

Pidginization and creolisation:

Pidgin is a bastardized form of a language and it is the result of contact language. Most pidgins are associated with colonization and they have negative connotation. Creole emerged when pidgin is adopted by a community as a native tongue. Creoles are

usually more developed than pidgin. As it is stated by Fromkin and Rodman (1978), Creoles often arose on slave plantations in certain areas where Africans of different tribes could communicate only via the plantation pidgin. We have the French Creole in Haiti and the English Creole in Jamaica. A good and notable one in West Africa is the Krio spoken in Sierra Leone. In Nigeria, Creole could be said to be spoken in the Eastern part. Pidgin French is also spoken in Ejjigbo, Osun state because of the contact of the people with Côte d'Ivoire, a popular home of pidgin French in West Africa.

Pidgins are rudimentary in nature i.e. they are devoid of much grammatical rules. Consequently most students find it easier to express themselves fluently in pidgin than in Standard English. This has gone a long way in having effects on their spoken and written English. Very few families communicate in good English at home, therefore year in year out the performance dwindles

Code switching:

Code switching has been defined by many linguists. Broomfield (1933) defined it as the use of more than one language by speakers in the execution of a speech act while Adeniran (1980) said it as “the alternation of two or more linguistic varieties in the same conversation or interaction”.

This is a big problem in the teaching of both English and French Languages. Students, as well as teachers mix English and other languages they speak during their conversation and they also pass instruction within and outside the classroom. Examples of conversation often heard are:

(Yoruba) *Exam yen ti le ju* - That exam is too difficult.

(Hausa) *Zen je wurin friend dina* -I am going to my friend's place.

However Gumperz, (1982) stated that “code switching does not necessarily indicate imperfect knowledge of grammatical system in question”. It is only in few cases that code switching arises as a result of their inability to express themselves. At times, code switching leads to a speech disability even among those who have a good knowledge of the languages. It is as a result of having many language mechanisms at their disposal that they find it difficult to know which one to select. This is common among teachers. Occasionally one hears students of French say ‘*Tola ti lo nager*’ ‘Tola has gone to swim’. Also, in their interaction, they often call themselves nicknames in French. An example among students of Adeyemi College of Education, Ondo, is ‘where is *grand père?*’ (Where is grand pa?).

Interference:

Interference implies the interplay between two languages to produce a different variety. In other words, the features of the first language are found in the target language. In this case, what is meant is not clearly expressed. Interference occurs mostly at the semantic, phonological and grammatical levels of languages.

SEMANTIC PROBLEMS

Semantic deals with meaning in utterances. Most speakers transfer their thoughts in the first language to the target language disregarding the fact that each language has its own peculiar way of operation. For instance, a Yoruba speaker of English language may say “I am coming” when he is actually going. Also both Hausa and Yoruba speakers give the wrong interpretation to the meaning of the adverb of quality ‘more’. Examples are:

- (i). ‘I can play volley more than you’ for ‘I can play volley better than you’, which means ‘mo le gba volley ju o’. in Yoruba.
- (ii). You are not more than the others for you are not better than the other. Interpreting “Baki fi sauran ba.” in Hausa.

In French, semantic interference is manifested in the area of vocabulary especially those similar in orthography to English words. They are called “Faux amis”: Take for example.

Table

English	French
Library	Bibliothèque
Bookshop	Librairie

There is a high tendency for students to translate, “I am going to the library”, as ‘*Je vais à la librairie*’ instead of ‘*Je vais à la bibliothèque.*’

Phonology problems

Interference is very high at the level of phonology. This deals with sounds as perceived by the hearer. Every language has its own peculiar way of pronouncing. Learners are therefore prone to make errors when they come across sounds which are found in the language they have already known. It has been discovered that many Nigerians learning English hardly pronounce the sound /θ/ and /ð/ correctly. Words like ‘thin’ and ‘then’ are usually realized as /tin/ and /den/ respectively. A great number pronounce /ð/ in teacher as /æ/. Similarly in French, /ø/ and /y/ are almost unreliable for many Nigerians learning French even those who have undergone a substantial training in language in language studies. The French sound /ø/ in a word like ‘peu’, little is often pronounced as /o/ that is a word like ‘pot’, pot. Similarly /y/ found in “tu” you is realized as /u/ ‘tout’, all. What they do is to substitute the sounds with the one closest to the ones found in their first language.

It is also important to mention the problems of diphthong in English language. The sound /əv/ and /ei/ are usually realized as a single vowel sound as found in Yoruba words like ‘ori’ and ‘ile’. It is also worthwhile to refer to the use of nasal vowels in French. Words like

‘bon’, ‘banc’, and ‘pain’ are usually denasalized by most learners. Even the Yoruba speakers have the same sound, ‘aran’ and ‘gangan’ and they still commit the same error.

Many learners feel the number of /s/ sound they produce in their speech is what determines how good their spoken English is. They maintain the plural morpheme /s/ even when it is preceded by a voiced sound. To them ‘bags’, ‘boys’ and ‘lads’ all ends in /s/ instead of / z /. Many Anglophone speakers of French realize the plural morpheme /s/ as found in ‘enfants’. This is wrong because they are often silent. They are either ignorant of or ignore the fact that most consonants ending French words are silent. Teachers have a big task to perform to rectify these errors.

GRAMMATICAL PROBLEMS:

Interference in grammar occurs as a result of the fact that each language has its own distinct grammatical structures. To start with, the use of tenses is more complex in French than major Nigerian languages and English. The subjunctive is an aspect of conjugation which scares many students from French. Most students in the Colleges of Education hardly communicate using the subjunctive throughout their studies. It is very easy to see ‘*Je veux que vous venez*’ written as ‘*Je veux que vous venez*’. In English, the use of ‘wish’ in clauses which takes the subjunctive in form of another tense and the conditional clauses have always been misused by many students. This ought to be rectified as U.T.M.E. (Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination) and W.A.E.C. (West African Examination Council) have not stopped to test the student knowledge in this area. The table below shows these examples:

Correct	Incorrect
A) I wish he came now.	I wish he comes now
B) I wish he had come yesterday.	I wish he came yesterday
C) I wish he would come tomorrow.	I wish he will come tomorrow.
D) If he came, I would see him.	If he came I would have seen him.
E) If it rains, he will be happy.	If it will rain, he will be happy.

Another area that poses great difficulties to Nigerian students learning French is that of agreement. An adjective must always agree in gender and in number with the noun it qualifies.

(a) ‘*Le garçon est intelligent*’. This boy is intelligent.

‘*La fille est intelligente*’. The girl is intelligent.

The agreement of the past participle is even much more complex. (b) ‘*Le garçon que j’ai vu*’ - The boy that I saw.

‘*La fille que j’ai vue*’ - The girl that I saw.

In addition, a great deal of students often put the object pronoun in the wrong place in their sentences. In French, it comes before the verb. This is not so in English, Yoruba and Hausa. That is why they write ‘I see them’ as ‘*Je vois les*’ instead of ‘*Je les vois*’. Most of these errors make the learners’ expressions inaccurate.

Problems of variety:

The existence of varieties of the foreign languages has constituted a great deal of problems to their learning. In Nigeria we have the American, the British and the Nigerian varieties of English. In French, students do not know whether to imitate teachers who studied in France or those who studied in Francophone West African countries. For example, the former, will pronounce 'les matins' 'close to' /le matã/ while the latter will realize /matẽ/.

The presence of many varieties has great controversy for many linguists. David (1990) says, "the acceptance of local varieties of the English for academic purpose is a matter of controversy that cannot be avoided in second language teaching".

Solutions:

A number of measures could be adopted to rectify these anomalies. It is good to note that it has to start from the teacher himself. He must have a good mastery of the various aspects of the languages. It is what he knows that he gives out to the students. In Nigeria, we emphasize the British English rather than the local varieties. The teachers should serve as examples by speaking relatively correct French and English. This, of course, must not be limited to the classroom alone. Teachers should use and introduce students to various lexical items, idioms and registers as this will help the learners to find relevant words and express what they want to say. Consequently, they overcome of problems arising from contact languages.

Assiduous work needs to be done by the teachers to correct language interference among their students. They must be familiar with errors often committed by foreign language users and take their time to correct these errors. When wrong meanings are attached or drawn to certain expression, attention of the learners should be drawn to such errors committed.

With reference to phonological level of interference, a lot of drills are required. David (1975) suggests that "the best possible tool a teacher could have in his pronunciation sessions is a comparative analysis of the language". The teacher should take his time to teach the sounds properly, bringing out the differences in them. Jimoh (1996) suggests a good training in the area of auditory perception which will be followed by articulatory exercises. The former done through the production and repetition of the minimal pairs and sounds often confused. One could have:

French		English	
/	/u/	/ið/	/e/
Tu	tout	peer	pair
Sur	sourd	ear	air
Vu	vous	fear	fair
Du	doux	bear	bare

Students will become more aware of the differences between the phonemes of the two languages through sound in contrast during the training exercise. Here is an example:

English	French
Bond	Bon
Ban	Bane
Pen	Pain
Ignorant	Ignorant

Furthermore, the teacher must take his time to correct the learners. He must know each one of them individually and their areas of difficulty. During class drills, errors should be pointed out to students by their colleagues. As practiced in most language laboratories, students could be asked to repeat sounds as recorded in tapes, after which it will be replayed to see how close they are to the correct sounds. Gimson (1975) says that oral training requires constant and assiduous practice to instill new phonetic skills.

Grammar should not be learnt by memorization of its rules. It is good if students are left to discover the grammatical rules themselves. There is the need for practice in structural exercises that teach specific rules of the foreign languages. For example, the subjunctive tense drills are good. Students will learn better if such exercises are related to the activities of their daily lives. Where exercises have no parallel in the first language, special exercises should be provided to create new speech habits in the students.

CONCLUSION

The problems facing the teaching and learning of English and French languages in Nigeria are numerous. Consequently, this paper cannot claim to have exhausted this area. To attain a relatively high level of fluency, there should be a lot of practices in the area of oral speech and spontaneous writing. This demands a lot of effort from both the teachers and the learners. Adequate mastery of the foreign languages could be attained if a systematic approach is adopted in the case of Nigeria. Efforts will be rewarded if every one involved in the learning process is motivated to contribute to the educational advancement of the country.

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