

## CURRICULUM INNOVATION IN FRENCH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING IN NIGERIA

**Afsat Sanni-Suleiman (Ph.D),**

afusat@unilorin.edu.ng

&

**Abdulmalik Ismail ( Ph.D)**

Department of French,

University of Ilorin

[abdulmalikismail11@gmail.com](mailto:abdulmalikismail11@gmail.com)

&

**Zeinab A. Abubu (Ph.D)**

Department of Arts Education

University of Ilorin, Nigeria

[Zeinabudu@gmail.com](mailto:Zeinabudu@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

*French is one of the most widely taught foreign languages in Nigerian institutions. However, its teaching/learning is faced with a number of challenges in recent years. The most recurrent is the dwindling number of students' enrolment for the course in our tertiary Institutions. The pertinent questions here are as follow: what is responsible for the dwindling number of students' enrolment in French? What could be done to make French language attractive to students? This paper therefore aims at highlighting the renewed purpose of French learning in our society taking into consideration the digital age of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Using the pragmatism approach of Pierce Sanders (1921) as theoretical framework, we scrutinize the French teaching/learning curriculum in order to streamline it, to cater for the need of Nigerian French teacher/learners of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

**Key Words:** curriculum, innovation, Pragmatism, students' enrolment, teaching/learning

### **Introduction**

French language can be considered as foreign language in Nigeria. In the words of Byram (1998: 8) "Foreign language competence has since ancient time been a sign of the educated man". There exist many reasons for the pursuit of knowledge on foreign language. Among which are, as Ajiboye (2005: 41) puts it, "an increased desire to make new friends, break new grounds, form fresh alliances, renew old ties and establish international cooperation". For Bamgbose (1991: 11), the rationale behind language education include, among many others, "to integrate into the life of the community (...) learning a border language for trade purposes, learning a lingua franca, a language of wider communication or a national language for instrumental purposes".

Geographically, Nigeria is an island of francophone countries: Niger Republic to the North, Republic of Chad to the North-East, Benin Republic to the South-West and the Republic of Cameroon to the South-East. All these countries use French as official language. In order to maintain a healthy, cordial, diplomatic, economic, sociopolitical and cultural relationship with her immediate neighbours, Nigeria needs French language. This cannot be achieved without bringing to bear all efforts and sagacity of the stakeholders. Consequently, the need to effectively teach and learn French language becomes a matter of priority to these stakeholders.

In addition, French is a language of International organizations such as AU, UNO and ECOWAS and the importance of French language as a world language in both political economical, socio-cultural, sociolinguistic and educational life of the people of Nigeria can be appreciated through the following assertion: “Politically, French is spoken by 12.5% of the world 7 billion people and it is the 5<sup>th</sup> inter-continental world language in terms of the number of speakers found in all the seven continents on the earth” (French Language @ <http://www.google.fr>). Lecturers of French have no choice than to devise ways of making the teaching and learning of this language very interesting, dynamic, unique and robust.

Judging from the foregoing, this article, through pragmatism theoretical framework of Pierce Sanders (1992), seek to highlight the importance of French language as a key factor in the development and stability of Nigeria with the renewed efforts to innovating the French language teaching/learning curriculum. The work is divided into three subsections: the background to the studies, the theoretical framework, and the practical approach to the teaching and learning of French language in Nigeria.

### **Background Problems to the Studies: Teaching of French Language in Nigeria**

Generally, language education can be said to be the teaching and learning of a language. It is the type of education which lays more emphasis on the study of the language being it a national or a foreign language. It is aimed at enhancing interpersonal communication, general communication and it is also for the purpose of training and producing professionally qualified and competent manpower in languages (Amah, 2009, P.78).

French language education also includes exposing learners to French and Francophone (European) civilization in addition to the four language skills (which are speaking, listening, reading and writing). Thus, learners of French Language Education in Nigeria are exposed to and made to become aware of the world around them and this leads to self-appraisal and appreciation which in turn leads to self-value development.

Similarly, the main aims of French Language Education is to widen the scope of the learner’s knowledge about the French and the French speaking community (African and European) and benefits from the experience of the past in order to fit into the present modern Nigerian context (Federal Ministry of Education 2001). It is clear that these aims are informed by the country’s determination to promote greater cooperation with her neighbours of the sub-region even in the educational sector as well as the desire to facilitate Nigerians’ leadership status in the sub-region (ECOWAS), numerically dominated by francophone countries.

This move towards facilitating regional integration with francophone ECOWAS countries is spelt out in the country’s National Policy on Education which stipulates that “for smooth interaction with our neighbours, it is desirable for every Nigerian to speak French. Accordingly, French shall be the second official language in Nigeria, and it shall be compulsory in schools” (National Policy on Education, 1998: 9). French language teaching in Nigeria is therefore designed to provide the learners with the sufficient communication skills and aptitudes to make the language a tool for communication first with the immediate African francophone community (West African francophone community) then the rest (France and Canada for instance) of the francophone world (Onyemelukwe 2002 and Simire 2013). In order to make the teaching and learning of French language effective, it is always useful to involve the use of ICT.

It is pertinent to note that French language is the second official language in Nigeria. For effective communication with her neighbours, Nigerians desire French language. This is why the language has for some few years back been conferred with the status of the second foreign language in Nigeria (NPE 2004; Ogah 2007). With the recent status of French as the second official language, the National Policy on Education (2004, p.19) made it a compulsory subject in primary, junior and elective in senior secondary schools in the country.

However, the teaching of French language is facing a lot of challenges ranging from lack of adequate infrastructures, to obsolete teaching methodology; poor funding, students’ attitude to learning and interest, commitment and mindset among students, parents and society.

## **Aim and Objectives of the Study**

This study therefore aims at highlighting the renewed purpose of French learning in our society taking into consideration the digital age of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The objectives are to :

- Suggest ways to make French language teaching and learning more robust and dynamic;
- propose the innovation of the current French language curriculum to reflect the reality of 21<sup>st</sup> century;
- put forward combinable skill acquisition subjects with French language; and
- proffer innovative methodology of teaching and learning French language in Nigeria (perspective actionnelle).

## **French Language Education Curriculum in Nigeria: Current Status**

French language curriculum, as it is today, has gone through several reviews and it focuses mainly on non-vocational aspect of learning. In the National Policy on Education (1977-1988), French was an elective course struggling with Arabic language on the same hour on the time table. However, in 2004, an innovation took place as a form declaration of the former Head of State (General Sanni Abacha), which brought a new hope to the study of French language in Nigeria. French then became compulsory from primary to junior secondary school. In spite of this declaration, nothing tangible was done to implement the policy.

There is the need on Nigerian Government to up-grade the French language which was left as an elective language in some school curriculum. Despite the fact that the Nigerian government appreciates the potential values to be derived from the French language, much is not done to innovate its curriculum to reflect the 21<sup>st</sup> century need in Nigeria.

The Nigerian government wants to benefit from French language and so allows some diplomatic, political and economic outfits such as ECOWAS bilingual school, ECOBANK, etc to be instituted in the country. Her dreams may not be realized if the well planned curriculum is not effectively implemented. There is dire need of French lecturers for the French language curriculum to be effectively implemented. From 2004 till date, nothing tangible has been done to review the curriculum of French language teaching and learning in Nigeria to reflect the 21<sup>st</sup> century needs.

## **Theoretical Framework: Pragmatism Approach of Pierce Sanders (1921)**

Pragmatism is a practical approach to issues. The value of an idea is its “cash-value,” a term coined by William James (1956) which we borrowed here to show the importance of pragmatic approach to solving problems. In philosophical terms, pragmatism states that practicality precedes dogma, even though pragmatism is itself a sort of dogma. As Peirce puts it, in several places, “...pragmatism is the doctrine that every conception is a conception of conceivable practical effects”. (p. 250). Thus, pragmatism allows any flight of imagination, provided this imagination ultimately alights upon a possible practical effect. (p. 249).

Any hypothesis, therefore, may be admissible, in the absence of any special reasons to the contrary, provided it is capable of experimental verification and only in so far as it is capable of such verification. This is approximately the doctrine of pragmatism. (p. 250). Pragmatism, Peirce wrote, is “nothing else than the logic of abduction” (p. 57). For example, suppose we are in the midst of our work, considering a number of facts but not able to see any general principles. However, it suddenly comes to us that if a certain principle were true, then it would explain these facts.

Mendeleev’s (1997, p.123) development of the Periodic Table is an example of abduction. He sought the general principle that would explain the facts of inorganic chemistry. He noticed that if atomic weights were the general principle, then it would explain the facts. Peirce’s three propositions of pragmatism, can be derived, are as follows:

1. Everything in our minds is based on something generated by our senses.
2. Perceptual judgments include generality, which enables us to produce general statements based on them.
3. The subconscious uses abduction to produce perceptual judgments; the conscious mind does not criticize those perceptual judgments. Burch (200: p. 13) explains Peirce's Pragmatism as follows: "When [Peirce] said that the whole meaning of a (clear) conception consists in the entire set of its practical consequences, he had in mind that a meaningful conception must have some experiential 'cash value,' capable of being specified as some sort of collection of possible empirical observations under specifiable conditions." Atkins notes that pragmatism is intended to enable us to "see what difference the truth of certain concepts would make to our lives".

Webster's *Dictionary* (2001) describes pragmatism as the proposition that "the meaning of conceptions is to be sought in their practical bearings that the function of thought is to guide action, and that truth is preeminently to be tested by the practical consequences of belief"

Thayer (1978: p. 232) explains that "Because the emphasis is upon method, Peirce often remarked that pragmatism is not a philosophy, a metaphysic, or a theory of truth; it is not a solution or answer to anything but a technique to help us find solutions to problems of a philosophical or scientific nature".

## Methodology

The research methodology adopted in this study is an exploratory research of one time. Mixed method was used in this study. 150 questionnaires were distributed among various students' in the Nigerian universities on Year-Abroad programme in Badagry. The students' leave across all regions in Nigeria- North, South, West and East. Simple percentage and frequency table were used in the presentation of data.

The major interest of this research is to present and showcase the dwindling interest of students in learning of French and to suggest ways of improving the student's enrolment in the French language learning in Nigeria.

## Results and Discussions

**Table 1:** When did you start learning French?

| Response              | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----------------------|-----------|------------|
| Primary School        | 6         | 4.0        |
| Secondary School      | 18        | 12.0       |
| College of Education  | 25        | 16.7       |
| University (Remedial) | 101       | 67.3       |
| <b>Total</b>          | 150       | 100.0%     |

**Source: Field work (2022)**

From the results above, it is pertinent to note that 4.0% of the respondents started learning French from the primary school, while 12% from secondary school, 67.3 from Colleges of education, while 16.7% from University (Remedial). The results showed that the French language study is being neglected at the primary school level, which is the basic foundation of learning.

**Table 2:** Would you have preferred another course other than French language? If yes, which one

| <b>Response</b>         | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|-------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Mass Communication      | 13               | 8.7               |
| Law                     | 6                | 4.0               |
| History                 | 6                | 4.0               |
| English Language        | 5                | 3.7               |
| International Relations | 81               | 47.9              |
| Linguistics             | 2                | 1.8               |
| Theatre Arts            | 2                | 1.8               |
| Economics               | 2                | 1.8               |
| Psychology              | 2                | 1.8               |
| Music                   | 2                | 1.8               |
| Business Administration | 1                | 0.9               |
| Tourism                 | 1                | 0.9               |
| Chemical Engineering    | 1                | 0.9               |
| Sociology               | 1                | 0.9               |
| Computer Engineering    | 1                | 0.9               |
| Guidance and Counseling | 1                | 0.9               |
| Spanish                 | 1                | 0.9               |
| German                  | 1                | 0.9               |
| Banking and Finance     | 1                | 0.9               |
| No                      | 20               | 14.6              |
| <b>Total</b>            | <b>150</b>       | <b>100.0%</b>     |

**Source: Field work (2022)**

The results above showed that majority of the respondents or 47.9% would have preferred International Relations in the place of French. 14.6% of the respondents preferred French alone without any form of combination while 8.7% preferred Mass Communication. 4.0% preferred Law and History while 3.7% opted for English Language.

**Table 3:** Do you like the methodology of your teacher?

| <b>Response</b> | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|-----------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Yes             | 29               | 19.3              |
| No              | 121              | 80.7              |
| <b>Total</b>    | <b>150</b>       | <b>100.0%</b>     |

**Source: Field work (2022)**

The majority of the respondents or 80.7% did not like the methodology of their teacher while 19.3% did like the methodology of their teacher. Judging from the result on the table above, it is obvious that a lot of teachers' needed to modify or adopt new methodology of teaching French such as Communicative Approach and Action-Oriented.

**Table 4:** What do you consider as the challenge facing a French graduate?

| <b>Response</b>              | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Lack of job opportunity      | 101              | 67.3              |
| Lack of societal acceptance  | 18               | 12.0              |
| Lack of business opportunity | 6                | 4.0               |
| Other, specify               | 25               | 16.7              |
| <b>Total</b>                 | <b>150</b>       | <b>100.0%</b>     |

**Source: Field work (2022)**

Majority of the respondents or 67.3% agreed that lack of job opportunity is the greatest challenge facing a French graduate. 12.0% agreed that lack of societal acceptance is the greatest challenge facing a French graduate, while 4.0% agreed that lack of business opportunity is the greatest challenge facing a French graduate. Others or 16.7% disagreed with the opinion and suggested that lack of innovation in the French curriculum thereby making a French graduate very sought-after, was the greatest challenge of a French graduate.

**Table 5:** How would you consider the current French language curriculum in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

| <b>Response</b> | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|-----------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Adequate        | 5                | 3.3               |
| Not adequate    | 145              | 96.7              |
| <b>Total</b>    | 150              | 100.0%            |

**Source: Field work (2022)**

The majority of the respondents or 96.7% agreed that French language curriculum in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is inadequate. While 3.3% of the respondents agreed that it is adequate. And that was the position of this article if French teaching and learning was to evolve in Nigeria of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, some combinable social sciences courses such as Mass Communication, Diplomatic courses, etc, could be combined with French language.

**Table 6:** Would you suggest the combination of French with any other course?

| <b>Response</b> | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|-----------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Yes             | 124              | 82.7              |
| No              | 26               | 17.3              |
| <b>Total</b>    | 150              | 100.0%            |

**Source: Field work (2022)**

From the result above, majority of the respondents or 82.7% agreed that French could be combined with other courses for maximum benefit and optimal results. Only 17.3% disagreed.

**Table 7:** What combination would you consider as the most appropriate?

| <b>Response</b>                             | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|---------------------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| French and International Relations          | 99               | 65.3              |
| French and Mass Communication               | 25               | 16.7              |
| French and Tourism                          | 18               | 12.0              |
| French and any other course, please specify | 8                | 6.0               |
| <b>Total</b>                                | 150              | 100.0%            |

**Source: Field work (2022)**

From the results, the majority of respondents representing 65.3% opted for French and International Relations, while 16.7% preferred French and Mass Communication, French and Tourism got 12.0% and other courses representing 6.0%. Judging from the result in table 7, majority of respondents preferred French and International Relations and the result further proved that, that combination will solve the problem or poor enrolment of students in French language classes. Considering the above results, there's no doubt that French language teaching needs to be overhauled to accommodate innovations to sustain learners 'motivations.

## **Needs for Curriculum Innovation in French Studies**

To keep learners abreast of the new happenings of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. “Innovation refers to the Curriculum innovation occurs to attest to the fact that the world is not static as it is constantly changing and education which is the bedrock of development has to change if teachers want process by which a product or a service is renewed or updated by applying new techniques or implementing new value-enhancing education/schooling ideas.” (gumiandcompany.medium.com).

Therefore, “curriculum innovation is the introduction of new and improved practices and methods into how students are taught. It covers both planning and implementation and involves a wide range of actors that include learners, teachers, guardians, and education experts among others” (Karkkainen cited by Button(2021) online ([www.oer.pressbooks.pub](http://www.oer.pressbooks.pub))). Karkkainen further explained that “curriculum holds an outstanding place when seeking to promote innovation in education, as it reflects the vision for education by indicating knowledge, skills, and values to be taught to students. It may express not only what should be taught to students, but also how the students should be taught “(gumiandcompany.medium.com). Thus, the teaching and learning of French should be improved by incorporating new subject matter, new method, and new technology that will enhance the quality of education and prepare learners for professional life.

## **Suggested Modification/Innovation**

The suggested innovations included but not limited to:

French language as a nexus to other discipline such as law, translation and many social sciences courses French and Translation, French and Mass communication, French and Tourism, French and Journalism, French and International Relation, French and Marketing, French and Banking and Finance, French and Computer science, French and Peace and Conflict Resolution, French and Law, etc.)

- Skill acquisition (entrepreneurship) be enshrined in the French language curriculum whereby French language graduate will be able to function independently in a chosen profession.
- Innovative methods of teaching French language to include task-based approach (actionnelle perspective). It is an approach where the planning of learning materials and teaching sessions are based around doing a task, that is, one learns a language by using it, rather than studying its different components in isolation.
- French language be taught alongside other discipline to enhance opportunities and productivity.

## **Conclusion/Recommendations**

Effective methods of teaching French language abound. The teacher should be dynamic to use the methods that appeal to the students. This will help the students to develop greater interest in the language, when language teachers to employ them in the language classes. The language experts should develop some combinable course options such as French and Diplomatic Relations, French and Mass Communication, the two being the most prominent as we discovered in this study.

French language should be seen as an important field of study capable of contributing greatly to the development of Nigeria of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The ability to speak both French in Nigeria will be an added advantage for finding a job with many multinational companies using French as their working language. With the innovation in place, students will be more motivated and committed to the learning of French.

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