

# THE TEACHING OF THE FRENCH LANGUAGE IN POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN NIGERIA: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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## ***Abstract***

*In this paper, the authors look at how the French Language is taught as a subject in Post-Primary Schools in Nigeria. Highlights are made on the problems teachers and students face as regards the French Language. How can these obstacles be overcome? Are there any prospects? What are the benefits of studying the French Language?*

## **Introduction**

Language may be used for three purposes in Education: Literacy, subject and medium of instruction. Literacy, in this connection, is taken to refer either to initial literacy as an introduction to the rudiments of reading and writing or to adults being trained to read and write. The French language may be taught as a subject without any implication of its further use as a medium of instruction. But, whenever a language is used as a medium of instruction, for instance

the English Language, the implication is that it is also taught as a subject.

For a language to be introduced as a subject at the secondary level, it therefore, means that the rudiments of the language must have been taught at the primary level i.e. the students must have a good background of the language so that they can flow easily. One would notice that this is the problem of the French language in Nigeria. No wonder only a few of our students do show interest in the language.

This paper sheds some light on how the teaching of the French subject in post-primary schools can be carried out, in spite of the impediments. The writers believe that though there may be a bit of the traditional flavour, it has been tried over some years with good results.

### **Problems of Teaching French in Post-Primary Schools**

#### ***Unqualified and Inexperienced Teachers***

Any educational language policy requires for its effectiveness the availability of teachers, who must have considerable competence in the language. Competent and experienced teachers are not found in some of our secondary schools. There are still some secondary schools that do not have teachers of French and so are not able to offer the subject. Quite a number of such teachers are graduates of Colleges of Education who, though good in methodology, may not have been exposed to enough French to be able to speak it very well. The result is that many students of French in secondary schools acquire 'book French' - being able to read and translate, but hardly able to speak. This is a major constraint. A teacher is supposed to be a good model for imitation by the students learning the language. But, because some teachers are not experienced and trained, they cannot speak it correctly. So, students tend to perform poorly.

In secondary schools, the teacher factor is more important than the length of time used for French teaching. This is because the teacher teaching it must teach it effectively. Unfortunately, such teachers who are not competent not only teach French badly but provide a poor model for their students to imitate. The result is that at the end of a

long course of instruction in French, the level of competence attained is still quite poor.

### ***Lack of Materials***

Some secondary schools do not possess enough materials for teaching French while others do not even have at all. According to Brann (1969:4), "Elementary teaching materials based on French and largely urban (if not Parisian) centres of interest fail to motivate younger secondary school pupils." Some secondary school teachers complain of lack of radio, television, video cassettes and even textbooks. There are secondary schools where students have never gone to Badagry for their year abroad or even a francophone country. Majority of our secondary schools do not even have a language laboratory where the French language can be effectively practiced orally.

### ***Lack of Motivation/Interest***

The negative attitude some principals adopt towards the teaching of French is also discouraging. The numbers of periods allotted to the teaching of French in the timetable may be two or three every week where English and Mathematics are taught everyday in a week. French is often added to other subjects in the timetable for example French/CRS, French/Economics, French/IRS, French/Geography, etc. This means the teaching of French takes place at exactly the same time these other subjects take place. Most of our students are found facing difficult choice. As a result, they lose interest and take other subjects.

The new policy on education insists on the teaching and learning of the three mother tongues: Ibo, Yoruba and Hausa, as national languages. It is also rumoured for the past two years that French has been made compulsory for Primary IV to SS III. Yet, today the status of French from primary through secondary school still remains the same. Today some persons do not see why French should be taught, instead of English. One notices that a lot of students who began studying French from their JS I soon become disenchanted and end up abandoning it between SS I and III. The problems of teaching and learning French are so numerous that it is easy to understand why only a few students, if any at all, always write French in some schools

in the final West African Senior Secondary Schools Certificate Examinations (SSSCE) or National Examination Council (NECO) Examinations every year.

### **Recommendations**

The teaching of French is characterized by the constant use of the audio-visual methods. This is why Dehaven (1988:16) could boldly state that: “With only a little encouragement, children become curious about their language. Get in the habit of enjoying or pondering language out loud together. Watch newspapers and magazines for interesting articles related to language.”

According to Ubahakwe (1973:30):

*The Growth of Technology especially in the area of electronics has provided more precise tools for studying, analyzing and teaching the sounds of a language. It is becoming increasingly obvious that a language laboratory is an essential, if not indispensable, requirement for the effective teaching of modern languages.*

From the foregoing, one would agree that a language laboratory is very important to teach French i.e. why principals of secondary schools must look inwards on how to create language laboratories with support from the government.

Ubahakwe still went further to suggest that since language is an oral activity, emphasis should be placed on teaching it so that students can acquire the oral skill at the very early stages of learning the language.

To ascertain the survival of the French language in Nigerian secondary schools, the Ministries of Education should make French compulsory from Primary IV to SS III, as was announced by the Federal Government. They should also ensure that they furnish secondary schools with audio-visual materials and good French textbooks with foreign scenes and names changed to local ones.

As Leo (1964:23), puts it:

*...with other audio-visual material, the skilful teacher will be able to teach in a lively manner by making reference to the clothes his pupils are wearing, to their relative heights, to the actions they perform, and where possible to their physical and emotional needs.*

### **Conclusion**

French was introduced in Nigeria in the 60's following the conference at Yaounde in 1961. This conference recommended the teaching of French in Nigerian secondary schools as a second foreign language, English being the first. For the fact that Nigeria is surrounded by French speaking countries, learning French is the first step to ease communication with her neighbours. And, if Nigeria must quickly be developed scientifically and technologically, it will be necessary to encourage the teaching and learning of French in schools. No country can speak of technological transfer without paying attention to the instrument of learning which is language.

This paper has given some prospects and benefits of studying French in Nigerian secondary schools. It has also exposed some of the problems of teaching and learning French in Nigerian secondary schools, and made some recommendations on how to overcome them.

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