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Table of Contents

A Critical Discourse Analysis of Farooq Kperogi's Article on Pantami Professorship Saga ¹EZE, Patricia and ²ABDULLAHI, Hadiza Bello	1-10
Critical Discourse Analysis of the Speech of Former Senate President Ahmed Lawan on Xenophobic Attacks in South Africa Habu YUSUF	11-21
Overview of Systemic Functional Grammar Theory: Language as a Social Semiotic System ¹ABDUL, Mohammed Adem and ²DANJI Sabo	22-31
Tale of a Poor Girl in Need of a Long Lasting Marriage: An Analysis of Hausa Folktale Abubakar MOHAMMED Gombe Ph.D	32-38
A Morphological Study of Compounds in Twitter Posts on the Covid-19 Pandemic Saleh AHMAD Abdullahi	39-51
A Comparative Analysis of English Language and Nyimatli Language Sounds ¹Jamila ABUBAKAR Usman and Hauwa Kulu GEBI	52-58
An Analysis of Westernisation at Crossroad: An Exploration of Contemporary Hausa-Fulani Communities Abubakar MOHAMMED Gombe Ph.D	59-65
An Assessment of Early Grade Reading in Lower Primary Schools in Gombe LGEA, Gombe State ¹SULAIMAN, Jamila, ²DANGA, Luka Amos PhD, and ³IBRAHIM Adamu Mohammed	66-76
Linguistic Construction of Depression: An Appraisal of Personal Narrative ¹OGUNJIMI, Florence Taiye and ²MOHAMMAD Abubakar Musa	77-86
Monophthongisation of Closing Diphthongs in the Spoken English of Undergraduates of Federal University Wukari ¹Olusola Elizabeth OGUNRINDE, ²Kehinde Emmanuel OGUNRINDE and ³Ichonma Frank YAKUBU	87-100
Implicature in Viewers' Comments: A Pragmatic Study of AFCON 2024 Online Viewers' Responses ¹Jaafar Ahmad WAKILI, ²OLADIPO Abiola Mary and ³Auwal ABUBAKAR	101-109
Cohesion in Selected Essays of Final Year Undergraduate Students of English Hauwa K. GEBI Ph.D and Jamila USMAN	110-125
A Formalist Study of Sexual Metaphors in Achebe's <i>Girls at War</i> and Adichie's <i>The Thing Around Your Neck</i> Danjuma Garba MUSA	126-135

“The Play’s the Thing”: Illusion, Anti-illusion and the Politics of Femi Osofisan in Tegenoni: An African Antigone

¹Fatima INUWA and ²Christopher ANYOKWU, PhD 136-145

A Morphological Analysis of Acronyms in Nigerian English

¹Sani GALADIMA and ²Kabiru MUSA 146-156

English Language, Literature and National Development

¹Aishatu BELLO Umar and ²Mohammed Isa OGBOLE 157-164

Exploring the Theme of Ambition in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*

Khadijah SALEH Abdu 165-171

Re-Inscribing African Women in Patriarchal Culture: A Study of Onwueme’s *The Reign of Wazobia*

¹Murjanatu Muhammad RILWAN and ²Ibrahim Kanti BALA 172-176

Identity Crisis in Abubakar’s *Season of Crimson Blossom*: A Psychoanalytical Study

Sani SAIDU Ibrahim 177-183

The Challenges of Teaching and Learning French in North-Eastern Nigeria: ICT as a Panacea

¹Abdulkarim MUSA Yola and ²Samirah SALIHU Gwani 184-190

‘A Sha Ruwa Ba Laihi Bane’: The Sound of Cultural Change

¹Mohammad ABUBAKAR Musa and ²IBRAHIM Ruth Ishaku 191-200

A Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Sexual Harassment in Kunle Afolayan’s *Anikulapo*

¹Moshood ZAKARIYA and ²Balikis YETUNDE Isiaka 201-214

THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING AND LEARNING FRENCH IN NORTH-EASTERN NIGERIA: ICT AS A PANACEA

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Abstract

This paper delves into the challenges of teaching and learning French as a foreign language in Nigeria, with specific reference to North Eastern region. The paper will create target strategies for improving French language education in the region. The region is neighbouring three different Francophone countries. The prospects of teaching and learning French as a foreign language has been adversely affected by many factors such as lack manpower, modern educational facilities and the effect of pandemic in 2019 to 2022, alongside other factors, insecurity, remained a major issue in the area. French is widely spoken in West Africa and serves as a mother tongue for millions of Africans. It is also a second official language in Nigeria, with varying levels of education teaching it. The study identifies significant obstacles including language policy, insecurity, pandemic, multilingualism, poor leadership, and corruption. French opens up numerous opportunities in different industries, such as business, journalism, tourism, translation, and foreign services. It also facilitates movement within West African states, goods and services, cultural exchange, and historical heritage. Given its immense potential, it is crucial to overcome the challenges and promote the teaching and learning of French in Nigeria. This paper strongly feels that information and communication can play a remediation role. This is because it is computer-based, which makes it possible to provide a platform to teachers and scholars of French to interact effectively. The Nigerian government needs to promote and facilitate the teaching and learning of French, especially in the North Eastern region. Analysis for the paper is based on the use of secondary data.

Keywords: French, Teaching, Learning, Challenges, Pandemic, Security and Policy, Information and Communication Technology

Introduction

Owing to colonial heritage, English language teaching and learning have been entrenched in Nigerian schools, with the French language not enjoying the same status. Learning French is however encouraged in Nigeria for the fact that the country is bordered by Francophone countries (Offorma, 2015). Teaching and learning French in Nigerian schools progressed without major issues in past decades. Many factors play a significant role in falling standard of French teaching and learning in the Nigeria and North eastern region particular, such factors lack of manpower, modern teaching facilities, corruption, insecurity and recent pandemic period. Therefore, the paper intends to identify various challenges that affect teaching and learning French in the North Eastern Nigeria, it also highlights

the prospect of the language in the region. Some factors affecting teaching and learning French as a foreign language in North Eastern Nigeria were highlighted and assessed based on their impact on the language (Egwujioha & Aloh, 2020; Folorunsho & Iyanda, 2022). Northeastern Nigeria geographically covers six states: Bauchi, Gombe, Adamawa, Taraba, Borno and Yobe states.

French teaching/learning in North Eastern Nigeria has massively declined due to several factors contributing to the falling standards of teaching and learning French as a foreign language in the region particularly in the lower and tertiary institutions (Adewuyi, 2022).

The Role of French in Nigeria and Africa at Large

French serves as a vehicular language in West Africa, the language serves various functions in different countries in Africa, ranging from official to non-official language and it is also spoken as a native or mother tongue by millions of Africans. The language facilitates movement within the West African States, either as an official language or as a *Lingua Franca*, for the exchange of goods and services, cultural exchange and historical heritage.

According to a report by the BBC, the International Organisation of La Francophonie claims that there are 300 million French speakers around the globe today and a survey showed that 44% of French speakers live in sub-Saharan Africa. It is also expected that by 2050 about 85% of French speakers may live on the African continent as estimated by an organization that monitors statistics on the speakers of the language. This claim was supported by (Leclerc, 2019) The French language has a significant global presence, with an estimated 321 million speakers worldwide, comprising 77 million native speakers and 244 million non-native speakers. The number is projected to get a significant increase to 700 million by 2050, which will be driven by demographic growth in Africa continent and expanded language instruction in many countries in other continents around the globe. French as a *lingua franca* plays a vital role in international community in communication, commerce, tourism, education, and research, solidifying its position as a vital tool for global communication and exchange

Consequently, the prospects for the French language appear promising as the language keeps connecting to other parts of the world. Therefore, Nigeria as a giant of Africa and being surrounded by French-speaking countries needs to improve and promote teaching and learning French in the country.

French in Nigerian Education System

French is taught as a foreign language, as a full-fledged discipline in Colleges of Education, at undergraduate and postgraduate levels in Nigerian Universities and also as a General Studies course in our Polytechnics and some Universities. In addition, the language serves as a second official language in Nigeria, the language is also taught at different educational levels in Nigeria ranging from primary, secondary to tertiary institutions. Many students learn French as an additional advantage or as a service course within their academic career that can open many juicy opportunities to them, such as businesses, jobs like journalism, tourism, translation, teaching and careers in foreign services and diplomacy.

Literature Review

It is true that many researchers have conducted researches concerning the challenges and prospects of many Nigerian languages and the second language learning. The paper reviews and synthesises key studies that examine the challenges and prospects of second or language learning, providing a comprehensive overview of the current state of language teaching and learning in Nigeria. The challenges and prospects of language education in Nigeria have been thoroughly examined by various researchers. Adegbija (2004) highlights the complexities and opportunities within Nigeria's multilingual landscape, while Bamgbose (2000) discusses the broader implications of language policies and how they affect language teaching in a society. Igboanusi and Putz (2008) establish the importance of positive language attitudes for the success of multilingual education. Omoniyi (2003) highlights the impact of language ideologies, culture in language development, advocating for policies that support linguistic diversity. Nzelu and Okoye (2018) identify practical challenges in teaching our indigenous languages, such as inadequate resources and capacity building, and suggest how to improve in the present situation.

Viviane Koua (2013) discusses the Internet in French Language Teaching and Learning: Positive and Negative, the computer-assisted learning technology is considered an ideal aid for French language teaching and learning. It provides learners with an easy and functional approach and also guides teachers to technological teaching aids. However, teaching and learning as a second or foreign language through a new medium is culturally limited if compared with physical contact teaching. The study examines the role of computer technology with emphasis on the internet and its associated media in the facilitation of teaching and learning French on the Internet. The work is related to our work even though it is limited to Internet and computer-assisted teaching and learning. Therefore, this paper covers wider challenges of teaching and learning French beyond the internet teaching and learning. Faniran (2016) examines the role of the French language in developing the 21st century Nigerian graduates. French as a foreign language in Nigeria has many advantages as regards all spheres of life.

According to Ahmad Faizin HS (2015), language teaching is connected to sociolinguistics in many ways because different social factors can affect language teaching and learning positively or negatively. The relationship between sociolinguistics and language teaching is very important in order to achieve the main objectives in a particular language teaching. Some social factors such as situation, context, and social settings have roles in language teaching.

Methodology

Primarily this is a qualitative study. Many French teachers and learners were and interviewed regarding the challenges faced before the pandemic, during and after the pandemic period. Computer-mediated sources, such as the internet, were consulted for data collection for this study. The sources were carefully studied during the extraction of relevant data.

Theoretical Framework

An Applied Linguistics approach is adopted for the research. Therefore, the paper outlines the challenges faced by teaching and learning French as a foreign language in Nigeria, notably in the North Eastern part of Nigeria. The researcher intends to analyze the data from the perspective of language learning and the society. Thorne, S. L. & Smith, B. (2011) Second Language Development Theories and Technology-mediated Language Learning is adopted as our theoretical framework; the theory states the relevance of considering social factors in applying new methods when teaching a foreign language.

Challenges of Teaching and Learning French in North Eastern Nigeria

The Nigerian government is paying less attention to facilitating and promoting teaching and learning French at different educational levels in the country. French teaching and learning have fallen under difficult circumstances, chiefly in Borno and Yobe states of the Northeastern part of Nigeria. In recent years, almost all teaching activities were shut down except a few towns in those States. Consequently, teaching and learning French is seriously affected in the region. Some of the challenges of teaching and learning French as a foreign language in Nigeria are unmasked below.

Political, Language Policy and Security Factors

Studying humanities in Nigeria is facing a setback as a result of technological development; particularly, studying languages is becoming unfavourable as a result of negligence by government institutions. French teaching and learning is faced with many challenges, especially in the north-eastern part of the country, where hundreds of schools remain closed for security reasons, although the region has started recovering from a series of challenges including the Boko-Haram insurgency.

Recently, the Pandemic (Covid-19) factor worsened the situation as a result of the country's rigid educational system and policies. Nigeria finds it difficult to transform the educational sector to a technologically-friendly system. The government pays less serious attention in integrating information and communication technology from the primary, secondary and tertiary institution in the country. This development will give Nigeria the opportunity to compete with other developing and developed nations in terms of learning. Therefore, North Eastern Nigeria has more peculiar challenges in addition to challenges encountered in learning French as a foreign language in Nigeria.

Pandemic (Covid-19) Factor

The pandemic leads to closure of Nigerian schools for almost ten months which led to more than 50 million children to remain at home as reported by UNICEF. The education system in Nigeria is already burdened with low participation and learning achievements; these factors increase challenges faced by these children and also has the potential to set back recent gains in the education system. The pandemic is a serious threat to the global development, which has affected all our institutions of learning in Nigeria. The Nigerian education system was seriously affected by the pandemic where all schools were shut down ranging from primary, secondary and tertiary institution. Therefore, these cause a serious setback to teaching and learning French as a foreign language.

Significance of French in Security Enhancement

French is a vital tool in fighting crimes across the Nigerian borders. Nigeria security can enhance their intelligence gathering if they speak French to some level whereby, they can have the first hand translation and interpretation of security details in their hands in French language. The activities of the criminals ranging from Boko Haram, banditry and kidnapping are all having link

with their fellow criminal in the French speaking neighbouring countries. Therefore, a purpose-driven approach to teaching and learning French has a lot to offer in the area of security, looking at the fact that most north eastern states are bordered by countries that peak French as a lingua-franca. In terms of involvement also, countries like Tchad and Cameroun participate in this war on terror in two visible ways. One, among the nationals of these countries is the Boko Haram soldiers/fighters. Two, the authorities themselves have formed a coalition of forces with Nigerians in order to fight the insurgents, with the language divide notwithstanding. In effect, teaching and learning French is clearly necessary in the wake of Book Haram activities.

Multilingual Factor

Nigeria is a multilingual country, with people from different backgrounds and social classes. Multilingual societies, in turn, witness diverse settings and modes of language acquisition and learning in which especially the phenomenon of cross-linguistic influence becomes a factor that needs to be taken into consideration and deserves to be explored to come out with more ways that can make teaching in such society easier. A foreign language teaching and learning in multilingual settings is faced with several challenges especially that of mother tongue influence and language interference. Therefore, a teacher teaching a foreign language, such as French, in a multilingual environment, like the north eastern Nigeria, where an average person speaks at least three to four languages, needs to put more effort than a teacher teaching in a monolingual or bilingual community.

Recommendations

Improving information and communication technology institutions of learning is very important in order to enhance the teaching and learning of French in north eastern Nigeria in the current situation. Language laboratories should be set up and audio-

visual centres set up to facilitate the teaching of French language and any other foreign language for that matter. However, this should not only end in our classes but also in our homes and work places. In modern times, it is easy to have computer-mediated teaching aids at home as people have personal and portable computer devices through which language learning programmes can be learnt. Similarly, television, sound sets and DVD machines can all be harnessed for language learning in an environment beset by twin calamities of insurgency and covid-19 pandemic. This will make teaching and learning French easier and closer to all interested Nigerians, and it is in line with what Nidhi Joshi, a Communications Manager of UNICEF in Nigeria, says in a report responding to COVID-19, that the Federal Ministry of Education sought to mitigate the immediate impact of the pandemic by using online and offline platforms, television, radio and take-home materials to keep children learning. UNICEF Nigeria has supported the Ministry throughout this process.

This can be realised in Nigeria only through designing a dynamic online and offline educational video, customized e-learning platform, making a classroom learning a dynamic experience even at home for Nigerians. This is an excellent opportunity that will ensure Nigerians to continue learning during and beyond the pandemic, which continues to be a threat to the educational system in the country. The e-learning package shall ensure easy access to internet and internet facilities to both teachers and learners of French as a foreign language. A serious institutional collaboration is needed so as to facilitate the programs across the country.

In the area of security, there is need for French-speaking security personnel. This is a significant tool in the fight against insecurity in the region, particularly and Nigeria, at large. Nigerian security personnel are in great

need of certain level of French to enhance the level of security in Nigeria and especially in the North East region.

Similarly, there is need for motivation from Nigerian government to promote and facilitate teaching and learning of French within the country. There is need for more government policies to encourage teaching and learning of French as a foreign language in different academic institutions in the region. Academic institutions have a vital role in the promotion and provision of effective environment for learning French as a subject or as a discipline that will reflect positively the functions of language in the region.

The Nigerian government needs some reforms that will improve and upgrade the old method of learning foreign language that can accommodate teaching French within the current global challenges and North Eastern Nigeria peculiar challenges. The integration of information and communication technologies in teaching French is a very useful support in enhancing teaching and learning a foreign language. The Oral and written performances will definitely improve. Teaching and learning French should be given special treatment beyond what is obtainable in English and other Nigeria Languages. This is because English and other Nigeria languages have greater opportunity of being learned because they all have linguistic communities in Nigeria. The absence of linguistic communities where French is used as a language of communication makes learning of French more difficult; and it makes many Nigerians believe that it is not possible to learn the language.

There is need for motivational attitudes toward teaching and learning French language in the region. Similarly, the availability and ability to use modern teaching supporting materials such as computers, audio visual material and internet facilities is very important in teaching the language.

There is also the need for competent teachers who have access to instructional facilities to teach French as a foreign language. Such classes should be well-equipped with modern facilities such as digital boards, language laboratory and multimedia classes in their process of teaching French. The integration of information and communication technologies in teaching French is a very useful support in enhancing teaching and learning a foreign language. The Oral and written performances will be definitely improved.

Conclusion

The work unmask challenges and possible solutions that can promote teaching and learning French in Nigeria and particularly in the North Eastern region. The government should improve the old traditional system of teaching French as a foreign language. This research therefore provides teachers, students and institutions with relevant information on how to improve and facilitate teaching French across the region. Government institutions, schools and language centers should ensure adequate provision of teaching facilities such as language laboratories, modern equipped classes, multimedia rooms with internet facilities and accessible to teachers and learners. The availability of modern teaching materials will help learners and will facilitate effective teaching and learning of French as a foreign language. Developing new functional teaching strategies and use of modern materials and techniques will certainly help in teaching French as a foreign language easier and efficient. There is need for more research that will unveil challenges and provide solution to teaching and learning French in North Eastern Nigeria.

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