

# DYNAMICS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION: INNOVATIONS IN FRENCH

*Kikanme Ebele Chukwukpezie*

## **Abstract**

Over the years, the world major languages have been evolving in response to the changing world. This evolution has seen technology which drives the current pace of almost all human endeavors being integrated in language education. For French, the acclaimed language of international diplomacy, early speedy integration of technology powered its teaching from traditional conventional grammar approach through volumes of international texts, works and learning materials placed in various websites to more modern productive and faster pedagogical approaches. The overriding necessities of technology and meta-cognition must be in harmony with Nigerian government policy for French as a second official language. This paper submits that technology proffers an easier approach to French language skill acquisition and enables wordsmiths, teachers and learners to move with the dynamics of French lexicon

The barrage of new trends and innovations in language teaching and learning can create a sense of unease among language educators, pulling them in many directions, as linguistic, cultural, technical, and educational considerations compete for time and space in their conceptual frameworks. It is a feeling shared by all those who are engaged in second language acquisition (SLA). Thrush (2000) suggested however, that the profession's resolve to move beyond the search for a panacea has led to a new dynamic which he labels the "post-method" condition, namely, the choice of principled eclecticism over any single method.

## **Definition of Terms**

According to Soyoye (2001), a foreign language is one that is not the mother tongue of any group in the country where it is taught. In other words, a foreign language is an exogenous language, with which a child does not share any socio-cultural, socio-political and socio-economic affinity. Going by this definition, English, French, Arabic, German, Portuguese, Spanish, and Russian could be said to have successfully qualified for that status in the Nigerian system of education. Similarly, Bamgbose (1979) defined education as the aggregate of all the processes by which a child or adult develops the abilities, attitudes and other forms of behaviour which are of positive value to the society in which he lives; that is to say, it is a process of disseminating knowledge either to ensure social control or to guarantee rational direction of the society or both. Going by the definition of education, language education is thus the process by which a person develops the communicative attitude which is of positive value to his society. In other words, language education is the formal acquisition or learning of communicative skills.

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### **French Language in Nigeria**

French language which is regarded as language of love is a descendent from Latin spoken by well over 200 million people globally. Undoubtedly, French language is the only language other than English that is spoken either as a native language or as a first official language in five continents of the world. This is probably because colonial France took control of parts of Africa, the Carribeans and other parts of the world in the 18th and 19th centuries. One significant characteristic of French as an international language is the ease of assimilation by the recipients and the subjects. Apart from the fact that the French colonialists applied the powerful tool of language to exert the machinery of governance, law, administration, instruction and culture among others, it remains on record that the ease of assimilation and the growing love for the language among the colonised, fostered the consolidation of France as a colonial master in the then emerging francophone countries. This is buttressed by the fact that French language remains the official language of many of her colonies even in the post colonial era. It is therefore not surprising that French takes the second position after English on the list of the world's most influential languages. (Soyoye 200/ 1 It is a historical fact that French as a language was enforced in those countries that are now known as francophone. In fact, out of 51 member states and governments of the International Organization of Francophone (IOF), 28 countries have French as their official language (Shryock 1997). It could be said that the French language of today is an outcome of colonial evolution. French speaking countries in Africa are Algeria, Burundi, Chad, Congo, Republic of the Equatorial Guinea, Madagascar, Morocco, Rwanda, Togo, Tunisia, Senegal, Niger, Mali, Gabon, Cote d' Ivoire, Comoros, Cameroon, Benin, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Guinea, Mauritius and Seychelles (Shryock, 1997). Today, many African states have retained the status quo whereby French continues to serve as either the exclusive official language or as the medium of instruction in education .It is important to note that in many other countries, French plays an important role either as an administrative, commercial or international language. Nigeria falls today into the latter groupings following its adoption of French language as the second national official language.

Nigeria has more than 450 languages thus making her the most multi lingual country in Africa (Adegbija 2004). Following the colonization of Nigeria by the British in 1852, English language was subsequently made the first official language of the country. However, with the fall of the Roman Empire and the consequent decline of the prestige of Latin in Europe and in particular, since the second World War, French has replaced Latin as a foreign language in the British educational curriculum. (Ajiboye 2004). In view of this, French, which was then seen as the language of culture and enlightenment, was introduced into the curriculum of the overseas protectorates which included Nigeria and Ghana. Suffice it to say that French has been present in Africa for at least, three centuries since the French presence in Senegal in the 19th Century. It was later that other non- francophone countries embraced it. Examples are Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, among others. This means that the urge to learn and study French in Nigerian schools started in the early sixties before it was adopted as the second official language. Adegbija (2004) asserted that the need to facilitate communication and promote fruitful contacts among Nigerians and the outside world brought the urgent need for English speaking West Africans to learn French

### **Trends in French Language Education**

Innovation in foreign language teaching began in the 19th century and became very rapid in the 20th century. It led to a number of different and sometimes, conflicting approaches, each trying to be a major improvement over the previous or contemporary ones. However, there are three principal "approaches" to language teaching. They are the following;

1. The Structural view which treats language as a system of structurally related elements to code meaning. Examples of structural approach are grammar translation and the audio-lingual method.
2. The Functional view which sees language as a vehicle to express or accomplish certain functions, such as requesting for something. Examples of functional approach include the oral approach /situational language teaching.
3. The Interactive view which sees language as a vehicle for the creation and maintenance of social relations, focusing on patterns of moves, acts, negotiation and interaction found in conversational exchanges. Examples of interactive approach include the *direct method*, *the series method*, *communicative language teaching*, *language immersion*, , the *Natural Approach*, *Total Physical Response*, *Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling* and *Dogma (conversational language teaching)*. This approach has been fairly dominant since the 1980s. It is noteworthy that technology has overwhelmed every aspect of our life and naturally given impetus to modifications in interactive approach into an eclecticism in contemporary language education as would be observed in this discourse.

### **Technology and Foreign Language Learning**

Technology can be used to improve language proficiency in discrete skills. It can also be a good tool to present language as a holistic experience and to support the integration of skills. Technology promotes the adoption of a writer-reader perspective towards written texts. At another level, the way in which technology is changing communication will require a re-conceptualization of many of society's current assumptions about language, about learning and about language learning. Another aspect of the technology-learning link that is of interest to language teachers is technology's role in facilitating differential learning. (Thrush 2000). Another way in which technology is positively associated with learning is the link between technology and motivation. Hence, the interactive nature of modern technology makes it far more attractive to learners who have grown up with videos, hand-held games and other multi-media devices. When technology brings the real world into the classroom, learning seems more relevant and is more likely to engage a learner's feelings. Looking at the literature on the integration of technology, it is evident that experiential, goal-oriented, real-world activities and not pedagogical activities are those that generate the greatest enthusiasm among learners. Many of the activities made possible through the medium of computers and new technologies are not the traditional skill-getting/using activities, but activities that involve students in a truly task-based approach to language learning (Willis 1996). Students seem to prefer using computers and new technologies to do in the L2 some of the things they frequently do in their L1. For example, chatting on-line, surfing the Internet to gather information, and using word processors for writing. The idea that the computer can be a learning tool to help students learn, not so much by acting as a multimedia delivery mechanism for knowledge, but by augmenting the learner's ability to

ask questions, to explore, to form active strategies and so forth is an idea that is so obvious.. However, the full implementation of this idea would have the most radical consequences for higher education.(Garret 1998).

## **Technology and the Five Language Skills**

### **Writing**

It appears that learners focus more on form when writing with computers than they do when writing on paper. One explanation for this is that writing onscreen encourages distance and helps writers to adopt a stance as first readers of their text. Misspellings, grammatical errors are highlighted by the software for corrections, and font sizes and faces have a wide range for the learner to choose from except when writing under given instructions. Paragraphing and textual alignments and annotations all leading to perfect outputs rely heavily on the magnificence of technology. As a result, learners seem more likely to perform the editing function that is normally carried out by their teachers were they to write manually on paper (Garret 1998).

### **Reading**

All learners, but especially less proficient ones, will benefit from being able to access a variety of authentic documents that are enhanced to render them more reader-friendly. In the past, for instance a learner would need to go through volumes of abstracts to fish out a material before extracting it from the published journal which is time consuming and tedious. However with various search engines, just in a twinkle of an eye, various published works could be reached on internet on a particular subject. Teachers too, will reap benefits from the development of authoring systems in producing texts and lecture notes. Usually without accurate referencing, lecture materials are wooly. For teachers, the difficulty of selecting authentic materials for reading is minimized by easier access to materials with reasonable references. Such speedy access allows vast coverage in readings and begets teachers a lot of appropriate knowledge for teaching at different levels. (Thrush 2000)

### **Listening**

The advantage offered by newer laboratories stems from their use of digital instead of analogue systems. User interface is easier with a digital system, especially when it is interactive. Additionally, there are other possibilities for practicing listening that depend on the multimedia capacity of a computer linked to the Internet. Thus, a learner with a computer connected to the Internet can listen to Francophone radio stations, download audio freeware, or have almost the same kind of access to audio materials as if he were living in the target language country.(Brown 1999)

### **Speaking**

A learner who can access asynchronous (for example e-mail and bulletin boards) or synchronous communication (chat rooms, ICQ) on the Internet can improve his communicative competence in ways that are seldom possible in the acquisition-poor environment of the foreign language classroom. Several studies have produced empirical data which show that oral proficiency can be enhanced if learners engage in e-mail correspondence, voice messages and tandem learning with L2 speakers. Learners, it seems, benefit from the input and output possibilities of "conversation" in the target language through the medium of voice calls. The spoken production is often

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characterized by greater fluency, greater confidence and on the whole, richer language than those who had not been involved in exchanges on phonetics through e-learning.(Gasper 2002)

### **Culture**

Learners' proficiency in French culture can be dramatically improved by doing virtual tours of historic Parisian monuments or subscribing for cultural materials from on-line catalogues. By using Internet tools for developing students' C2 knowledge and awareness, they can begin to explore and experience both language and culture in a meaningful context (Olivier 1997)

### **The Use of Internet and Software**

The internet is an amazing tool for learning French. In "Situating French language teaching and learning in the Age of the Internet", Gasper (2002) explained how Internet-based learning meets the demand of the heuristic function (using language to teach, to learn and solve problems), an aspect of pragmatic competence, which is often difficult to acquire in classroom-based learning. However, with so many sites to sift through, it can be tough to find the best "learn French" sites. Software can interact with learners in ways that books and audio cannot: Some software record the learner, analyze the pronunciation and give feedback. Software can present additional exercises in areas where a particular learner has difficulty until the concepts are mastered. Software can pronounce words in the target language and show their meaning by using pictures instead of oral explanations. The sole language used in such software is the target language. It is comprehensible regardless of the learner's native language. Websites provide various services geared toward language education. Some sites are designed specifically for learning languages. Olivia (2010) outlined some useful sites presented below.

### **Some French Language Sites**

**About the French Language.** A compendious resource of French language and culture, including beginners' French lessons (with audio), grammar guides, and a large collection of annotated links to sites on French language and culture.

**Accord-Academie.** This site contains a large, categorised and annotated collection of links to useful resources on the net for learners of French as a foreign language.

**ARTFL French <=> English Dictionary.** A searchable bilingual dictionary giving simple definitions.

**Bonjour de France.** An interactive magazine for all levels of learners, to practice and learn French. The site includes comprehensions (using audio clips), grammar, idioms, business French, and many other learning resources. Each section has interactive exercises.

**Dictionnaire Français-Anglais.** An online bilingual dictionary with 102,000 terms, which lets you look for the exact word or words containing a particular root.

**FranceNet.** A UK-based Yahoo-like hierarchical and searchable index of French Internet sites.

**French Assistant.** An informal and user-friendly site for learners of French, with plenty of lessons and tests sorted by level with audio files, grammar and vocabulary resources. You can mix and match lessons and tests to suit your own learning needs.

**French Resources on the Net.** A list of links to French Internet resources, sorted by type.

**French verb conjugator.** A handy conjugator. Type in a verb and get the desired conjugation..

**Internet Resources for French Studies.** An extensive collection of categorised and annotated links to selected sites of interest for teachers and learners of French

**Le Monde Interactif.** Online version of the French newspaper, including Le Monde Diplomatique.

**Liens pour l'enseignement du français.** Internet resources for teachers of French at all levels and ages, sorted by type.

**Le Point du FLE.** This site is a 'portal' to an absolute wealth of French language learning resources on the Internet, including exercises, audio clips, grammar references, classroom activities and much more.

**BBC French** – The mother of all learn French websites.

**About.com French** – Comprehensive resource for learning French.

**French Assistant** – Free French language lessons, with over 150000 French words and phrases

**French in Action** – Dozens of instructional learn French videos.

**French Teachers dot net** – Shares teaching resources with other teachers. It has since grown into a site packed full of great learning resources.

**Real French** – Thousands of games and activities to help you learn French.

**French Mystery** - If you can already read some French, this is a great site to help you brush up without making it feel like work.

**Daily French Podcast** – Learn French via podcasts! A great use of technology to help you learn.

### **Conclusion**

This article has examined current issues in language teaching and research: the integration of technology and the role of meta-cognition. The article posited that these are key areas that could influence the way that teachers teach and students learn foreign languages in classrooms in the present decade. While the context referred to in this article was the context of higher education, the lessons to be learnt are no less relevant to the teaching and learning of foreign languages at all levels. Similarly, while the examples cited referred to French language learning/teaching, most, if not all, apply equally to other foreign languages.

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The article submits that technology must be premised on educational goals, and calls for a critical approach, to the adoption and integration of technology. The importance of French language cannot be over emphasized because Nigeria is surrounded like an island by francophone countries. Therefore, knowledge of French language will not only be of social, economic, political and cultural benefit to Nigeria, but would also help in conflict negotiation and resolution at the international forum. Furthermore, it will enhance Nigerians' academic and professional capabilities and potentials apart from enhancing good friendliness with her neighbors.

How far has the Nigerian citizenry learnt to speak, write, and most importantly, accept this foreign language, bearing in mind that Nigeria is the most multilingual country in Africa and has over 400 to 500 indigenous languages? This article contends, however, that instead of keeping technology and meta-cognition as divergent strands, the classroom practitioner can add value to her teaching and her students' learning by weaving these strands into a coherent approach that promotes learner autonomy.

### **Recommendations**

Nigerians should be properly sensitized, educated and empowered on the importance and use of the French Language so that they will be able to learn, speak and use it in their daily communication and interactions.

There is need for intensive and extensive training of Nigerians to acquire the necessary skills in French . Government should provide the necessary instructional materials as well as adequate infrastructure for effective teaching and learning of French language in schools .Government should equip language laboratories with modern learning aids such as computers, internet facilities, audio-visual materials, etc. More French language learning centres should be established to provide opportunities for people who may be interested in learning the language outside the classroom environment. Seasonal training and re-training of French teachers should be encouraged in order to constantly update them of the latest teaching methods and devices. There should be a monitoring team for the purpose of ensuring compliance to the national language policy as it affects the teaching of French. French Language instructors should be proficient in the use and handling of technological devices in order to efficiently teach learners using current innovations.

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