

Communicative and Speech Challenges of Teaching, Learning and Speaking French as a Foreign Language in Nigeria

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Abstract:

The Federal Republic of Nigeria is a West African Country surrounded mostly by francophone countries like Niger in the North, Cameroun and Chad in the East and the Republic of Benin in the West. French is an international language spoken by these surrounding countries. However, in 1996, French became one of Nigeria's official languages, having been so declared by the then Head of the Nigerian government, the late General Sani Abacha. The dominant and main official language in Nigeria remains the English Language. Since the introduction of French as the second official language in Nigeria, so many spirited efforts have been made to promote it as an instrument of communication, trade and international diplomacy. In other words, French has developed to become a language of technology, communication, entertainment, science and business. It is also not irrelevant in other forms of international interactions. Hence, there is the need for the Nigerian learner and speaker of French to acquire an acceptable standard form of it, if the Nigerian society is to function effectively and remain germane in the present day world. Generally, the Nigerian learner and speaker of French tend to re-interpret French stress patterns in terms of tones in relation to his indigenous language. This is a communicative and speech challenge to the average Nigerian. To facilitate the Nigerian learner and speaker's communicative skills in the class and in other diverse contexts, these communicative and speech challenges must be addressed. It is also a known fact that a good number of French learners and speakers in Anglophone communities have difficulties in even following television or radio programmes telecast or broadcast in French. This paper, therefore, identifies problems in learning and spoken French as associated with phonetic and phonological perspectives of the French language. It will also centre on how to articulate difficult sounds in French language. The work suggests possible ways of alleviating pronunciation problems like speech sound interference, articulatory and fluency disorders for the purpose of ensuring proficiency in the teaching, learning and speaking of French language.

Introduction

With globalization and the recent increased wave of linguistic interactions around the world, communicative competence in French language has become not only imperative but paramount if one must easily assimilate ideas of things expressed and also meaningfully make solid contributions to global issues. It is a known fact that language “creates a common pool of ideas... the feeling of togetherness through exchange of messages...”(UNESCO, 2001:3). Thus, language is a unifying tool and a great medium of interaction for diplomatic relations. It also serves as a developmental paradigm or basis for any given nation. It is in view of this that, in the words of Irene Udousoro (2002: 68), “French language was adopted by the Federal Government of Nigeria in 1996”. Hence, the teaching, learning and speaking of this language has become necessary if Nigerians must interact and break through “national linguistic barriers” (Cookey, 1990:20) There is the need to emphasize that the rapid growth and survival of any nation depends on social interactions and their international relations. Language, therefore, can influence a whole lot of things. Communicative competence and fluency in any language is power: it could serve as “...a system of defence to protect their domains...” (Bitner, 1989: 3) A person who knows only his or her native language and none other may be considered not very sophisticated, especially in a fast evolving society. One should endeavour to learn and speak one of the international languages like French, English, German, Chinese, among others. With the dwindling of the Nigerian economy and the negativities attached to local politics and social activities, the Nigerian society needs international affiliations in areas of commerce and trade in order to revive her economic activities. This cannot take place without a good communicative competence in an international language.

Different parties from diverse nations need to understand the terms involved in every business treaty before reaching an agreement, what Okpeh, (2004: 5) considers as a “process of change in which the world’s countries and their economics are increasingly integrated as a function of rising cross-border... with interest in areas of...Communications, trade and financial exchange...” One clearly observes here that the only obstacle to the manifestation of the above is in the adequacy or otherwise of one’s language of communication, for the lack of the requisite language is a limitation to one’s development. It is therefore pertinent to understand that a people needs a great deal of good oral communication competence in a foreign language if they are to embrace the necessary positive changes

in their various aspects of life. Albert Baugh and Thomas Cable (2002: 3) point out that “languages become important because of events that shape the balance of power among nations...as a direct reflection of political, economic, technological and military strength”

As it affects the Nigerian society, it is essential for French language to be learnt on two grounds: at the individual level, for interaction in the course of trade with neighbouring francophone countries; and at the corporate governmental level, for governments to effectively compete in terms of global interactions and appointments, and for easy digest of any television and radio programmes anchored in French language. This essay, therefore, investigates communicative and speech challenges associated with phonetics and phonological elements of the French language. The study aims to introduce and suggest ways to communicate effectively in French. It also aims at suggesting possible ways of curbing pronunciation problems like speech sound interference, articulatory and fluency disorders for the purpose of ensuring good speech skills and communicative competence in teaching, learning and speaking French language in Nigerian Schools.

Language and its Import

In examining the communicative and speech challenges of teaching, learning and speaking French as a foreign language in an Anglophone environment, a question comes to mind: What is language to the learner and to the tutor? Hawkes, (1997: 21) identifies language as a “social product of the faculty of Speech” while Pucciani and Hamel (1967: v) see language as a “subjective experience as we know it and speak it rather than an objective phenomenon” Language, therefore, is viewed as a phenomenon of the human mind and of course a process by which thoughts are translated into speech. Hence, communicative competence and speech performance of the learner depend on his level of abstractions and his ability to select from appropriate relevant lexical items as well as display adequate knowledge of linguistic and non-linguistic features and how to pair them in a suitable context. To contemplate possible processes for accuracy, proficiency, acceptability and fluent speech in French language, the tutor should probe into how speech sounds of the learner are articulated so as to be able to appraise the language divergences. Speech sounds, in this context, refer to the vowel and consonant sounds in French which determine the learner’s pronunciation and communicative value in oral French. To achieve a near communicative and speech

competence in spoken French, the need, therefore, arises for the study of phonetics as a theory of language.

Phonetics is that branch of linguistics that studies the speech sounds of any given language. Yule, (1996: 41) defines phonetics as “the general study of the characteristics of speech sounds” “Speech sound is any of the minimally identifiable discrete segments of sound occurring in speech.(www.thefreedictionary.com). Hence, a speech sound is a phonetically distinct unit of speech. In order to acquire self-confidence and effective speech skills in oral / spoken French, a list of phonetic symbols has to be used. Yule, (1996: 40) suggests the production of “a separate alphabet with symbols which represent sounds” Phonetic symbols are different from letters of the alphabet. This set of symbols is what Yule tagged as “phonetic alphabet” (1996: 41). French, like any other language, has its own set of words and sound systems which are also different from the set of sounds in any other language. For French speech sounds, one needs to properly and attentively study their characteristics since there is hardly any single sound in two different languages that corresponds exactly with another.

Interference Factors:

Several factors retard and slow down speech skills, communicative competence as well as the functional use of French for effective communication by the learner and speaker of French language. A learner/speaker who shows interest to learn/speak French as a language should be screened using oral interviews in order to ascertain the peculiar language needs of each of the learners/speakers, thus, paying special attention to their speech problems. This screening for speech problems should be done by experts in phonetics and phonology. Learners/speakers with dental ridge and other speech impediments like stammering and stuttering while speaking can be given specialized therapy to alleviate their mispronunciation problems. The French tutor should endeavour to identify the type of pressures exerted by the learner/speaker’s mother tongue on the stress, pitch, juncture, intonation and pronunciation of the French words.

There is also the need to sensitize the learner/speaker and the tutor on the problems of language disorders. Some of the notable and prominent speech problems which French tutors may likely identify in the course of teaching French include: abnormal stress, uneven rhythm, wrong falling of accent and incorrect realization of French words due to pronunciation

pattern of native dialect as well as articulatory disorders. Phonological disorders and differences occasioned by the phonological differential in each learner's sound system should also be noted.

The failure to consider the oral aspect of French has led to phonologically defective speakers of the language. It is necessary that the French tutor places emphasis on the listening and speaking language skills aside the reading and the writing skills. To achieve better listening skills, speech skills and communicative competence in spoken French, Oral Test in French should be made compulsory for the learner/speaker various schools that French is taught.

Phonological Perspectives

The phonological form of any language involves more than the recognition of the phonemes and distinctive features of the language. Yule, (1996: 54) opines that phonology is "the description of systems and patterns of speech sounds in a language" It follows, therefore, that phonology is the blue print of all the articulation of sound types and the organization of those sound types into meaningful language structure. The syllable is an important phonological unit in many languages. Kenstowich (1993: 250) argues that the syllable is an "abstract unit of prosodic organization through which a language expresses much of its phonology" Consonant and vowel phonemes occur sequentially in syllables; syllabic structures vary from one language to the other. In French, the rhythm is very even and the accent always falls on the last syllable of a word or group of words. For examples: Dominique, un café, un chocolat, and so on. There is also little syllabic stress on individual French syllables. An example of such is the word "im-pos-sible", not "impossible". The last syllable (except the ones ending in a "mute e") of a word or group of words has more or less stress. An example is, "c'est impossible" [sɛtɛ̃pɔsibl]. In understanding French, a correct division of syllables is essential for good communication.

When one speaks French, for example, the voice goes down at the end of a statement just as in English. However, in French, the speaker's voice rises after each group of words in the middle of a sentence. For example:

-----↗ -----↗ -----↘ Je voudrais un
pain, un fromage et un jus de pomme.

In French, certain words are pronounced depending on whether they are followed by a vowel or a consonant. There is either a Linking (Liaison) or an Elision. Liaison is the linking of a silent consonant to a word when the

word begins with a vowel or a silent “h” before the next word, or if the words belong to the same breath group. It occurs with plural subject pronouns, plural articles and plural possessive adjectives in French. Examples include:

- 1) Ils ont mangé [ilzɔ̃mãʒe]
- 2) Les hôpitaux [lezɔ̃pito]
- 3) Mes amis [mezami]

However, in pronouncing words like “un ami” and “un artiste”, the ‘n’ of ‘un’ is articulated as if it were the first letter of the next word. The two words: Unami and unartiste are linked together in Liaison. There is the need to clarify that the ‘n’ of ‘un’ is generally silent.

Elision is the linking of a consonant and a vowel sound. This is done by dropping the vowel at the end of a word before a vowel at the beginning of the next. Elision occurs in most cases before a word beginning with a vowel or an “h”. The final ‘e’ of monosyllables is often dropped or elided and replaced by an apostrophe (’). It occurs with the articles, “Le” (masculine) and “La” (feminine), with the pronoun “Je” and with the negative word “Ne”. For example:

- 1) Je + ai = J’ai
- 2) Le + arbre = L’arbre
- 3) La + école = L’école
- 4) Ne + est = N’est

It is also necessary to note that “I” could also be elided. In this case ‘I’ is only elided in “si”, when followed by “il”. For example:

Si + il = S’il

Phonetic Symbols

Phonetics provides the raw materials for phonology. The raw materials are auditory units otherwise known as sounds. These sounds are visualized through a set of conventions known as phonetic symbols. The symbols are designed in such a way that each distinct sound of a language is represented by a separate symbol. Yule(1996: 41) termed these symbols as “phonetic alphabet” A learner/speaker should be made to understand that phonetic alphabets (symbols) are not the same as the letters of the alphabet, although the phonetic symbol for a sound unit is the same as the letter standing for the sound. In French, one observes the combination of

letters standing for the same sound even up to two or more sounds. For example:

1. /S/ Le ciel {tʰɛsjɛl} , Le garçon {tʰɛgarsɔ̃}, Le professeur {tʰɛprɔfɛsœr}
2. /K/ Le sac {tʰɛsak} , Qui {ki} , L'école {ɛkɔl}

The spelling mark, "cedilla" (la cedilla-/ɰ/) which appears only under the letter "C" when the letter C is followed by "an""a", "o", or, "u", changes from the hard /k/ sound to a soft /s/ sound during articulation because of the cedilla. A tutor should ensure that a learner/speaker does not form the habit of pronouncing words from letters. Instead, the learner/speaker should be taught and encouraged to read the transcription guide (dictionary) of the pronunciation of French words provided. A learner/speaker's attention should be drawn to certain superfluous letters that should be silent at the initial, medial and final positions of such words/letters Examples include:

1. 'E' in words like: anglaise, douze, Sophie, seize, etc.
2. 'S' in words like: Paris, français, trois, Nicolas, etc.
3. 'H' in words like: Henri, hôpital, Nathalie, etc.

However, when a word in French ends in an "e", for example, petite, américaine, and so on, the consonant before it is pronounced. It is also to be noted that in French, the final consonant at the end of words are not usually pronounced. A good example is the word, "un restaurant" [œ rɛstɔrɑ̃]. In the same vein, the last "s" added to a word to make it plural is not also pronounced; example, "lesfilles" [lɛfij]. It is worthy of note that during pronunciation, the singular noun and its plural sound alike. It is very necessary to distinguish the pronunciation of "Le" and "Les".

In spoken French, articulation is often the only way to tell the difference between a singular and a plural noun. For example, "Le verre" [lɛvɛr] and "Lesverres" [lɛvɛr]. Sometimes, different letters are used for the same sound. An example is found in "f" and "ph": fils [fis], fillette [fijɛt], physique [fizik], philosophe [filɔzɔf]. The use of different words and meanings for the same sounds must also be noted. For example, "compte"(count) and "conte" (tale) have the same phonetic transcription as [kɔt]. There is also the use of the same letters for different sounds. For example, the noun "le président" in French, and the transitive

verb “ilsprésident” in French have different phonetic transcriptions as follows: “leprésident” [ləprezidā], “ilsprésident” [ilprezide]. There are other examples of problems similar to the above which are not highlighted here. Therefore, a learner/speaker should be cautioned against depending on pronunciation tips which are based on letters.

Complex Sounds Production

Some sounds are realized with articulatory configurations which may not be available in the learner/speaker’s language sound inventories. Such sounds pose pronunciation problems to the learner/speaker and should be taught technically. For instance, the consonant [r] in French, is not at all like the English [r]. It is pronounced at the back of the throat. Examples: Pierre [pjɛr], Paris [pari], bonjour [bɔʒur], Père [pɛr]. When pronouncing [r] in French, the back of your tongue should almost completely block the air going through the back of your throat. The consonant [r], when not silent at the end of a word, must be sounded distinctly by trilling the tip of the tongue. For example : Frère [frɛr]. The vowel sound [y] represented by the letter “u” also poses a little difficulty during pronunciation. To realize this sound with ease, round your lips as if to whistle and say ‘si’ with a rounded lips.

In the middle of a word, the letters “ill” almost always represent the semi vowel [j] which is like the “y” of “yes”. Examples include *vieille* [vjɛj], *feuille* [føɛj], *famille* [famij]. But in words like *ville* [vil], *mille* [mil], *village* [vilaʒ] the letters “ill” are produced as [il]. In French, the semi vowels [w] and [j] are pronounced very quickly, almost like consonants. Examples are [w]-*oui* [wi], *loin* [lɔɛ], *voiture* [vwatyr]. [j]- *bien* [bjɛ], *piéd* [pje], *étudiant* [etydjā]. The French vowel [o] is pronounced with more tension than in English. It is usually the last sound in a word. Examples: *château* [ʃato], *chaud* [ʃo], *aussi* [osi]. The letters, “an” and “en” represent the nasal vowel [ā]. A tutor should ensure and guide the learner/speaker properly to avoid pronouncing the sound “n” after the vowel. Examples of such sounds include [ā]-*enfant* [āfā] and *grand* [grā]. It is called “nasal” because some air pass through the nose when such words are pronounced. A tutor should endeavour to distinguish between the nasal and non-nasal vowel sounds as well as ensure that the learner/speaker does not pronounce “an” as [n] or as [m] after the nasal vowel [ô]. Examples are *avion* [avjô] and *comment* [kɔmā].

Speech Sounds Interference

Speech sound interference occurs when intonation and stress patterns of the learner/speaker's language is unconsciously transferred into the spoken French. This noticeable intrusion of the native accents and intonation patterns constitutes unacceptable influx in the learner/speaker's speech, thereby occasioning linguistic interference. This occurrence, perhaps, is why Hudson (2001: 12) argued that "every language seems to have linguistic items that reflect social characteristics of the speaker" Hudson's position sheds some light on the reason for traceable linguistic intrusions in the speaking of French. Hudson further explains that "the most obvious source of influence on linguistics variables are the speakers themselves, that is ... the experiences they have had" (2001: 12). Hence, speech sound interferences emanate largely from the transfer of linguistic habits from the native dialects to the target language.

In view of the above speech challenge, Skinner's model for the most complex human behaviour which is communication could be adopted. In his book, *Verbal Behavior, a Tribute to the Behaviourists' Paradigm*, Skinner, in (Fodor, Bever and Garrett, 1975: 163) suggests operant conditioning principles to language acquisition. To him, all language, including private internal discourse, was a behaviour that developed in the same manner as other skills. He argued that a sentence is merely a part of "a behavior chain, each element of which provides a conditional stimulus for the production of the succeeding element" Thus, the interaction of these factors in a learners' environment would lead to particular associations, the basis of all language. To reduce or curb this speech sound interference, tutors should ensure that learners are conditioned to imitate and obey all the set habits in oral/ spoken French language. Hudson (2001: 119) affirms this, by stating that "the society controls our speech, providing set norms which we learn to follow" To uplift communicative and oral speech competence in French language, the learner should be exposed to media resources like audio-visuals or radio. There is also the need for interactions with real French speakers. Visits during vacations or regular excursion trips to any nearby francophone country should also be encouraged.

There should also be an introduction of short dialogue sketches in the form of drama, using French language so as to foster better acquisition of communicative skills in oral/ spoken French. The introduction of debates, rhymes, recitations and story-telling as an integral part of oral tests in French will also help in improving the learner/speaker's oral

communicative skills in French language. To facilitate proficiency in the communicative and speech competence in French language, the Nigerian government needs to support the learner/speaker and the tutors with sufficient funding, logistics and good learning environment, as well as well-equipped and functional language laboratories for oral practicals in French. If the above are put in place, the Nigerian people stand to benefit tremendously both nationally and internationally. Journalists and other communication experts may wish to learn the oral aspect of French as they need the language for very obvious reasons. For instance, a great number of French vocabularies have found their way into English language. A few of such words are: "esprit-de-corps", "en masse", "tête-à-tête", "rendez-vous", "coup d'état", "impasse", "vis-à-vis" to mention but a few. Journalists and English language tutors need the French language to avoid embarrassing pronunciation errors of these French words.

Conclusion

This essay examined communicative and speech challenges in the teaching, learning and speaking of French in Nigeria. The essay problematized issues in spoken French as associated with phonetics and phonological elements of the French language. It also suggested possible ways of not only curbing pronunciation problems but of articulating some difficult sounds in French language. To ensure a better proficiency in communicative and spoken/ oral French, this work also suggested the introduction of short dialogue sketches in the form of drama, debates, rhymes, recitations and story-telling using French as a means of communication. It recommended the adoption of Skinner's operant conditioning principles to language acquisition to condition the learner/speaker to learn to speak like the French. For adequate communicative skills, oral competence, mastery and fluency in French language, quality time should be allotted to the teaching of oral French so as to aid rapid and high level of communicative and speech skills in the language. A functional language laboratory and competent diction tutors should be employed to teach oral French so as to reduce speech and listening problems.

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