

Language Interference: The Experience of the Yoruba Speaking Learner of French Language

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Abstract

Language education has taken a new dimension with the globalization of education and the potential economic advantage it portends. Hence the insistence on learning new languages as early as possible and at as opportunity arises. However, language learning is not without its own peculiar challenges, one of which is the interference of languages in learners. This paper focuses on the challenges posed by language interference to the Yoruba speaking learner of the French language. Drawing from experience in the field, the researchers highlight the different areas where interference occurs and proffer possible solutions. The paper also considers how external and internal factors may elicit language interference in learners.

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Introduction

In 1998, the French language became a compulsory subject at the primary and junior secondary school level. Effectively, an average Nigerian student was expected to be able to express himself in English language, French language and at least one indigenous language. The purpose of this was to position the country for globalization while not neglecting nationalistic values. Consequently, students had to grapple with the issue of code mixing and language interference in the quest to learn. The challenge of language interference also meant that language educational curriculum planners had to find new and innovative ways to teach the language – French – in a way that would sustain the interest of the student as well as achieve the goals as stated in the National Policy on Education (1998). The main concern of this research is to identify challenges faced by Yoruba speaking learners of the French

language, and to proffer solutions to these challenges.

Language learning methods

Communication plays a key role in human societies and forms the bedrock of social relationships. It can be verbal or non-verbal, but communication does not take place without instrumentality of knowledge. Linguistic scholars have come to agree that communication can only be achieved when there is a transmitter and a receiver, and when both can understand each other and give feedback. Dele Adeyanju, (2004) posits that language is very crucial to peaceful co-existence among members of a society and to the achievement of whatever goals are envisaged by the society. Language can be said therefore, to be at the very core of human existence. Okeke (2002:78) notes that language is an arbitrary system that allows to transmit representations to other. It is a system with many components that

makes meaning (communication) possible (Oderinde, 2005).

Studies on the linguistic characteristic of Nigerian societies reveal a large number of languages that differ from community to community. Greenberg (1971) puts the number of indigenous languages in Nigeria at 248, Hansford (1971) at 395, Bamgbose (1970) at 400 and Hoffman (1975) between 400 and 513. Apart from these indigenous languages, Nigeria is surrounded by other nations with different languages. Apart from all these indigenous languages, Nigeria was introduced to the English Language through colonization. The many languages found in Nigeria, together with the advent of English Language and in a bid to promote nationalism, made a case for language teaching in Nigeria. The National Policy on Education (1881) in recognition of the various indigenous language states:

Apart from appreciating the importance of language in educational process, and as a means of preserving the people's culture, the government considers it to be in the interest of national unity that each person should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages; Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba.

Language teaching or language education is the process of acquiring a second or foreign language. Avanika Sinha (2009) describes a second language as any language that is dominant in the official domain or in the society, due to its need for use in education, employment and other basic purposes. Language education becomes more imperative as communities attempt to relate with other linguistic communities. Due to an increase in globalization, nations have seen the need to expand their linguistic horizons through learning of other languages necessary for diplomatic, economic and political growth and development.

Acquiring a second language or foreign language could be through the traditional or grammar-translation method. This method is believed to be the oldest method of language learning. It involves translation from the native speakers' language and target language (J. K. Ojo, 2005). The traditional method is based on the assumption that learning a foreign language is mainly to build knowledge of the structure of the language. This traditional method requires learners to break down sentences to phrases and clauses to memorize the terms for structured drill etc. (Williams, 1990). The traditional method also favours reading aloud in the target language.

In contrast to the traditional method, language can be learnt through the natural or direct method. This method of language learning favours the use of oral activities prompted and assisted by the use of actions, gestures, pictures, real objects, illustrations etc. This method attempts to teach language in a manner as a child would naturally learn his mother tongue. This theory of language teaching is based on the assumption that a child is naturally wired to learn a language.

There is also the audio-lingua method otherwise known as Oral and Aural Method. Broughton (1980) refers to the method as a "teaching approach where oral imitation, memorization, and drilling precede spontaneous speech, extensively using recorded dialogue and drills". In the audio-lingua method, emphasis is on spoken rather than written language. This method is characterized by "rote memorization, role playing and structure drilling"

Regardless of the method of language teaching, it has been discovered that often, structures and rules of the mother tongue overlap those of the target language. This overlap is referred to as Language Interference.

Language Interference

Dwinastiti (2013) refers to language interference as the process of speakers or writers applying

knowledge from their native language to a second or foreign language. When the interference is positive, it is referred to as language transfer. According to Janusz Arabski (2006) language transfer occurs when learners apply their knowledge of one language to aid their comprehension of another. This would usually occur when the two languages have certain similarities. Language transfer can therefore be described as the transfer of linguistic features between languages in the speech repertoire of a bilingual or multilingual individual. Lekova (2009) is of the opinion that interference is “an interaction or a change in linguistic structures and structural elements. It is a deviation from linguistic norms in the spoken and written language”. Scholars have come to agree that interference cannot be said to occur except there is the presence of bilingualism. Lekova (2009) further opines that interference becomes non-existent when there is a good command of the languages involved. In subordinate bilingualism, the speaker does not have mastery of the second language as the first. Therefore, the mother tongue dominates and influences the second language which in turn leads to interference.

Two types of interference have been identified viz inter-language and intra-language (Lekova 2009). Inter-language interference occurs when speakers transfer linguistic norms from their native tongue to the target language. At other times, the transfer is from the language in which the speaker has more proficiency (which may not be the native tongue) in the target language. Often speakers of English Language make this transfer to the French Language.

Example: Je suis dix ans *as against*
J'ai dix ans
Je suis faim *instead of* J'ai
faim

In the sentences above, there is a transfer of the use of the verb “to be” instead of “to have” which is acceptable in French language. This type of language interference is more common than the intra-language transfer.

While the inter-language transfer is between two languages of different linguistic norms, intra-language transfer occurs when speakers make mistakes in the same language. Interference may also be implicit or explicit. When it is explicit, the mistakes made are both oral and written. In this case, the rules guiding the foreign language are totally ignored and the foreign language is placed under the rule guiding the mother tongue.

Example:

French : Ils sont heureux / Elles sont
heureux

English :They are happy

Yoruba :Inu won dun

In the English language as well as in Yoruba language, the abstract noun “happy” and “idunnu” does not change its spelling and pronunciation based on gender or number. Learners therefore tend to ignore the rule of gender and number accord in French language that would have made the second sentence in French language “Elles sont heureuses”.

When interference is implicit, learners simply avoid constructing phrases with a certain level of grammatical or lexical difficulty. This results in poor sentences that lack idiomatic originality. For instance, when asked “*Tu vas à la bibliothèque?*”, learners often respond with “*Non, je ne vais pas à la bibliothèque*” which semantically is correct, but could have been better expressed as “*Non, je n'y vais pas*”. The avoidance of the pronoun “y” shows a certain level of difficulty in the usage of that pronoun. Dwinastiti (2013) however notes that interference may not be entirely negative. Learners sometimes transfer linguistic features from the mother tongue in a bid to understand the foreign language. For instance, in teaching the personal pronouns in French language, learners become initially confused with the presence of “you”. For the native English speaker, this could pose a challenge, because “you” in English has no plural form. However, a Yoruba speaker is able to easily comprehend when he is referred to the pronouns “o” and “e” in Yoruba language. The Yoruba speaking

learner of French language is therefore able to understand

tu – you – o – singular

vous – you – e – plural

Aspects of Possible Language Interference between Yoruba and French Language

Language interference may affect any aspect of language: grammar, vocabulary, accent, spelling, pronunciation etc. The degree of interference is however determined by the extent to which both languages differ. One major aspect of interference as identified by Ilori J.F (2010) is in phonology.

Phonological interference refers to the influence of the first languages’ stress, rhyme, intonation and sounds on the second language. Ilori J.F (2010) makes a comparison of the phonetic structure of both French and Yoruba language and concludes that the

most negative interference occurs in points where there are the widest differences between the languages. In pronunciation, the influence of the French language is often observed in the pronunciation of certain consonant and vowel sounds.

Consonant sounds: The French language has a total of twenty two consonant systems which include three central approximants [j,y,w], two dental stops [d,t], one palatal nasal [ɲ], and one uvular [R]. The Yoruba language on the other hand has only nineteen consonant systems including two labio-velars [gb,kp]. In the consonant chart of both languages, some sounds are not shared which would cause interference for the Yoruba speaking learner of French language. Below is a table showing consonant sounds that are absent in one language, but present in the other:

Sounds	French usage	Yoruba usage
[p]	pas ‘not, step’; soupe ‘soup’	-
[kp]	-	Pupa ‘red’; paali ‘card’
[gb]	-	Gbogbo ‘all’; gbo ‘hear’
[ɲ]	Campagne ‘country’; montagne ‘mountain’	-
[v]	Vin ‘wine’; vie ‘life’	-
[z]	Rose ‘pink’; zero ‘zero’	-
[ʒ]	Neige ‘snow’; rouge ‘red’	-
[dʒ]	-	Aja ‘dog’; ijo ‘dance’
[R]	Rat ‘mouse’; rire ‘to laugh’	-
[r]	-	ra ‘buy’; rerin ‘laugh’
[ɥ]	Huile ‘oil’	-

The table above shows the consonant sounds present in one of the two languages under consideration. In some cases, the Yoruba speaking learner of French language has been prepared due to an early introduction to the English language. Consonants like [p] and [v] may not pose too much problems to the Yoruba speaking learner who has had years of learning and speaking English language. However, consonant sounds like [R], [ɥ], [ʒ] and [ɲ] could pose

a challenge. For instance, except in rare cases, the Yoruba learning speaker tends to replace the French uvular [R] with the Yoruba alveolar [r] in words like heureux, professeur, riz, merci etc. In other cases, where the French uvular [R] ends a word, the Yoruba speaking learner entirely omits the sound. Example is found in words such as bonjour [bõjuR] which becomes [bõju] due to language interference.

Vowel sounds: while Yoruba speaking learner may

have a certain level of difficulty with French consonant sounds, the interference on vowels is not as pronounced. This is due largely to the many

similarities that exist in the vowel sounds of both languages. The few exceptions occur in sounds such as:

Sounds	French usage	Yoruba usage
[y]	Tu ‘you’, lune ‘moon’	-
[ø]	Aveu ‘vow’, jeu ‘game’	-
[œ]	Peuple ‘people’, boeuf ‘beef’	-
[ə]	Je ‘I’; le ‘the’	-

Due to the absence of these vowels in Yoruba language, often students are unable to pronounce the words correctly. It is likely that Yoruba speaking learners will make mistakes like the ones below:

Je [jə] pronounced instead as [je]

Jeu [jø] pronounced instead as [jiu]

Tu [[ty] pronounced instead as [tu]

Word Formation: Another area where interference occurs is in the position of vowels and consonants in formation of words in both languages. In French language, consonants that end words are not often pronounced.

Example: Rat [Ra]
 Pas [pa]

In Yoruba language however, words do not end with consonant letters. Even words borrowed from other languages such as English, are re-invented to sound Yoruba. Consequently, every Yoruba word is pronounced to the last letter. Example:

Bread – buredi
 Table- tabili
 Sugar- suga

With this difference in both languages, Yoruba language speakers may forget that the rule of French language is that if the last letter of a word is a consonant, the letter should not be pronounced except in certain exceptions.

Grammatical interference refers to the misuse of pronouns, determiners, tense, mood and word orders due to an influence of the first language [L1] on the second language [L2]. Examples can be found in the

usage of certain words:

Savoir and connaitre: these French verbs are used in different situations although the interpretation is the same. It is possible then to hear students use ‘savoir’ where ‘connaitre’ could have been used.

E.g: Je sais l’ami de monsieur Ade *instead of* Je connais l’ami de Monsieur Ade

Je sais le Professeur *instead of* Je connais le Professeur

Determinants such as articles, demonstrative adjectives and possessive adjectives also often pose a huge challenge to learners due to the French rule that insists on agreement in gender and number. The Yoruba language on the other hand does not really pay attention to agreement in gender and numbers.

Example: Mes amis – my (male) friends
 Mes amies – my (female) friends
 Awon ore mi – my friends (male or female)

Notice that the orthography of the French phrase reveals the plurality of the nouns used as well as the gender of the nouns, while the Yoruba phrase does not reveal the gender of the friends and has only a word in the phrase to indicate plurality of the words.

Ma mère – iya mi – my mother
 Mon père – baba mi- my father

Whereas in French language the form of the possessive adjective changes to indicate gender, it is not so in either English or Yoruba language. This difference often poses a significant challenge to learners of the French language.

However, as learners gain mastery of the foreign language, the level of interference drops. This implies that it is not possible to see the same level of language interference in learners of different exposure to the target language.

Causes of Language Interference

Stephen Krashen, a leading American linguist and educational researcher, in his theory of foreign language acquisition known as Natural Theory, distinguishes between acquisition and learning of languages. From this theory, we can say that language acquisition is a process of natural assimilation which involves intuition and subconscious learning. This is the way that learners learnt their mother tongue. Language learning on the other hand, takes place after the mother tongue has been firmly in place. Language learning requires a more deliberate approach, it involves the learning of rules and dynamics of the second or foreign language. While the learner could be said to have grown into the mother tongue, he does not find the second language so natural, and so comes the interference taking place between an existing system of language and a brand-new language. In most cases, the language in the immediate society of the learner is the mother tongue. The second or foreign language on the other hand, does not enjoy this status. It becomes the duty of the French language teacher of the Yoruba speaking learner then to create an environment of instruction that is almost as will be found in a native speaker's environment.

In Nigeria, the status of the French language was raised as contained in the National Policy of Education (1998) which states:

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 primary and

junior secondary schools but non-vocational elective at the senior secondary school (FRN 2004:10).

However, the Nigerian student is not introduced to the French language in most cases until the first year of junior secondary school. Anyanwu (2006) affirms that a major challenge is the fear at the primary school level that pupils are too young to contend with another language. However, Comblain (1992) disproves this fear, while establishing that the development of both phonological and syntactic capacities is at its best in the first five to nine years of life. Anyanwu (1998) corroborates this fact while concluding that for optimal result and perhaps less interference challenges later, children should have their first introduction to whatever languages they will learn between the ages one to four. After this stage, it is believed that it becomes increasingly difficult to learn a new language.

One other cause of language interference is the social class of the learner. Robbins (1970) has concluded that the language development of a child is influenced to a great extent by the environment. Osanyin F.A (2005) posits that learner from upper- and middle-class families tend to develop better and faster when it comes to language. This could be due to the fact that parents from middle- and upper-class families have a little bit more information about the importance of the French language to the learner. Consequently, parents from middle- and upper-class families might be a little bit more willing to go the extra mile in assisting their wards in the learning of the language.

Recommendations

The researcher is of the opinion that language interference can be maximally reduced. When learners find certain grammatical concepts less abstract, there would be an increase in interest in learning the French learning. Based on the findings in

our research, we recommend the following actions:

- i. French language teacher should endeavor to have a good understanding of the languages in the immediate environment of learners. This will help the teacher find similarities with the French language that can be used to enhance the understanding of grammatical concepts in French language. It will also help the teacher identify areas of possible conflict with the French language system.
- ii. It is imperative that an enabling environment should be created for the learning of the French language. This could be in the form of debates, quiz and competition with sister schools. This will give the learner a consciousness that there are other possible speakers of the French language, and will inspire interest to gain communicative skills.
- iii. It is also recommended that the period earmarked for the learning of the French language should be increased to enable learners have more opportunities for oral practice. School managers should be educated on the importance of language laboratories for the learning of French language.
- iv. It is recommended that learners should be encouraged to go on excursions to French learning centres like Alliance Française and French speaking communities that surround us. They should also be encouraged to learn French songs, watch French movies and listen to talk shows in French language.
- v. Periodic training sessions should be organised by government and stakeholders in the French language community for teachers of the French language. The Nigerian government in

liaison with the French embassy in Nigeria can organize symposiums and seminars where teachers are introduced to new and innovative ways of teaching the French language.

- vi. In this age of unlimited communication opportunities, it is recommended that French teachers keep in touch with each other through the relative associations and through online forums where ideas can be exchanged on teaching techniques and ways of encouraging interest in the French language.
- vii. It is also very imperative that only people with passion and the right qualifications should be employed in teaching the French language. As much as possible, untrained French graduates should not be saddled with the task of teaching the French language.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as the Yoruba speaking student of French language is exposed to the language, the teacher must be ready to go to great lengths to reduce the level of negative interference on French language. The French language teacher requires patience and in-depth knowledge of both languages to assist the learner. It should be noted that once a learner finds the interference too difficult, he tends to lose interest in learning.

Language interference is a very real challenge faced by both teachers and learners of the French language in our institutions. However, the level of interference changes as the learner develops skills in the foreign language. To further reduce the challenge of language interference for the Yoruba speaking learner, all stakeholders need to be actively involved in dealing with this challenge. If we are to achieve the goal of having learners who will be able to converse effortlessly in French language, French language teachers need to find innovative ways to teach French

language to this genre of students.

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