Communicating in a Second Foreign Language: Edo University Students' Perception of Learning the French Language

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Abstract

Learning, understanding and communication in a foreign language have increasingly become a key component of the internationalisation of labour in a globalised environment. This study investigates how 22 students of the Department of History and International Relations at the Edo University Iyamho, Edo State, Nigerian study the French language. Using quantitative research method and the questionnaire as a sampling technique, a Google Form questionnaire with 9 semi-structured questions was designed to which students responded and filled online between 24 October and 15 November 2020. Based on the social learning theory, the study found out that although students prefer the French language to other foreign languages, their understanding of the language is only average and they are unwilling to continue to learn the French language after graduation. The study recommends the learning environment of foreign languages to be more interactive to deepen the students' interest and understanding of the French language.
Keywords: *French, foreign languages, students, communication.*

Introduction

Language is a unique medium of communication between persons irrespective of race, creed, and region of the world for the expression of feelings, desires, emotions, hopes, ideas, thoughts and queries (De Valoes, 2014; Sokip, 2020). The uniqueness of language, whether in words, gestures or tones enables human beings to use both written and spoken language to establish lasting bonds with others who speak the same language, a feature that distinguishes humans from animals (De Valoes, 2014). Language is also an important conveyer and transmitter of the culture of a people such that a good grasp of a language gives one an understanding of a people's culture more easily (Ali, Kazemian & Mahar, 2015).

The ability to communicate not just in one's native tongue but in foreign languages has become desirous in a multilingual global environment and gives such speakers an advantage over peers in the search for jobs and high-prestige positions. For

students, the learning of a second language "boosts brain development, bridges cultural connections, and gives them an economic edge" (Fost, 2010). A second foreign language for the learners or non-native speakers becomes a "tool for understanding and living the feelings, hopes, desires, and thoughts of others" (Sokip, 2020, p. 723).

In recent times, a second foreign language has become a necessity for graduation particularly for students who have majors in Arts & Science programs (Brod & Welles, 2000 cited in Ganschow & Schneider, 2006). However, in the learning of such second foreign languages, many students experience learning disabilities, otherwise called dyslexia (Ganschow & Schneider, 2006). Such difficulties may be in the form of a word, a structure, a phrase, a tense marker or an idiom in the generally agreed four areas of learning of a second foreign language, namely: listening skill, speaking skill, reading skill, and writing skill (Azarnoosh, 2009; Sokip, 2020). The difficulty of learning a second foreign language is particularly challenging for students who already experience some form of difficulties of language systems with the native languages or first foreign language such as reading, writing, spelling, grammar, listening and speaking. It can also be challenging for students who have no difficulties with the native or first foreign language (Ganschow & Schneider, 2006).

Ganschow and Schneider (2006) posit that students' difficulty in learning a second foreign language can be classified from mild to severe depending on whether the difficulty in the language systems affects one (mild) or some (moderate) or all (severe) of the aforementioned language system.

In Nigeria, students at all levels learn the English Language (first foreign language) from Kindergarten because it is the lingua franca of the country. This is in addition to their mother tongues. Many students still have difficulties mastering the English language. However, students who learn the French language do so as a second foreign language. Unfortunately, there is little literature on the difficulties Nigerian students encounter in the learning of French as a second foreign language. This study, therefore, attempts to interrogate how university students of the French language at Edo University Iyamho Nigeria learn French as a second foreign language while still mastering their first foreign language (English Langauge).

Consequently, the following objectives are the main focus of this study: To astertain

1. the degree to which students prefer French to other foreign languages.
2. the degree of students' performance at French examinations.
3. the extent to which students can communicate in the French language.
4. the extent to which students would continue to learn the French language after graduation.

Research Questions

The following research questions have been formulated for this research.

1. To what degree do Edo University students prefer French to other foreign languages?
2. What is the degree of Edo University students' performance in their last French examination?
3. To what extent can Edo University students communicate in the French language?
4. To what extent would Edo University students continue the learning of the French language after graduation?

Literature Review

In the present era, bilingualism (the ability of an individual or the members of a community to use two languages effectively) is encouraged and practised in almost all countries of the world. The number of bilingual persons is estimated at approximately half of the total population of the world (Grosjean, 1982). The primary objective of many second foreign language learners is to be able to communicate in the target language. This is because effective communication of a language enables the user to send and effectively receive messages and in the process, an ideal negotiation of meanings occurs. However, it is important to note that there are problems associated with bilingualism. This is pointed out by Bialystok (1990) when he posited that "the familiar ease and fluency with which we sail from one idea to the next in our first language is constantly shattered by some gap in our knowledge of a second language" (p.1).

Jordan (1941) was one of the first researchers in the field of second language acquisition who found a certain connection between attitudes which was the motivation of British students and their positive strides in French second language courses. Neidt and Hedlund (1967), subsequently, found a significant relationship between the positive attitudes of university students following courses of the second

language, and their performance at the end of their studies which Burstall (1975) proved was linked to the motivation they received. On his part, Deshays (1990) believes that the nature and the quality of acquisition of a second foreign language depend on two factors: (a) how the language was acquired and (b) the age at which the learner was exposed to the language. Hagège (1996) recognizes that the child learns the second foreign language better especially in the area of authentic pronunciation at the age of seven. On the other hand, some linguists (Beardsmore, 1992; Baker, 1997) believe that teenagers already possess high cognitive capacities to acquire the grammatical and syntactic structures of a new second foreign language very quickly.

Several parameters facilitate the learning of a foreign vocabulary (Nisubire, 2002). At first, the didactic has to try to clarify the morphological regularities. Thereafter, they work on the semantic fields, to know if the synonymy, the antonym, the hierarchical reports and the polysemy are presented very favourable to the acquisition of a rich and flexible lexical memory. The foundation of the acquisition of the competence of communication in a foreign language is based on the recognition of the connected speech at the first level of the competence of communication. In trying to discern the sounds of a language, the learners acquire a "minimal threshold of communication" (Cuq, 2005, p.179) which helps the learner to make statements.

On the issue of the challenges facing the communication in French as a foreign language in Nigeria, there is an urgent need for frequent exchange visits to either francophone African countries or France to acquire the requisite knowledge needed for the mastering of the language. Wellek et al. (1973) support this assertion that "only a person who knows a society from other sources than purely literary ones is able to find out if, and how far, certain social types and their behaviour are reproduced in the novel and other arts, including composition writing" (p.104) and Ogundokun (2013, p.13) remarks that "foreign language acquisition contributes to the societal developments of countries."

Theoretical Framework

Social Learning Theory

The basic hypothesis validated in the seminal work of Hatch in the late 1970s is that learners learn the structure of a language through interaction rather than

learning grammar to interact (Gass, 2003). The social learning theory is essentially a learning condition that involves the relationship between a learner and his/her environment. The word 'social' is defined as connected with activities in which people meet one another for pleasure (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 1948). Therefore, social learning is a type of learning that involves the connection between people and their environment, and how this environment affects their achievement in a learning situation. According to Bandura's theory, social learning contains three main elements, namely: individual, environment and behaviour. The individual element refers to inherent motivation, the environment as the external stimulus, and behaviour as the individual's deed (Mok Soon Sang, 2008). The interaction between the three elements forms the social learning process. In this case, the individual's motivation is affected by the environment and forms a new behaviour through the things learnt during the process.

Regarding foreign language learning, the relationship between social interaction and acquisition is one of the basic issues in foreign language acquisition. The review done by Young (1999) has shown that interactional competence is most applicable to explain cross-cultural communication. It also provides a proper outline for integrating studies of conversational phenomena within a broader context of social interaction. Among the four main domains of language study: reading, writing, oral and listening, social interaction plays a major role in oral and listening. Interaction is also key to the development of foreign language acquisition. Based on extensive research, there was an agreement that the learning environment must include opportunities for learners to engage in meaningful social interaction with users of the second foreign language to discover the linguistic and sociolinguistic rules required for second-language acquisition and production (Pica, 1987). This agreement is still applicable to today's second foreign language learning. A very good example is that students who study abroad where the language originates are usually more fluent and accurate in the second language they are using than students in their own native country.

Social interaction enables learners of a foreign language to communicate and use the language efficiently without any formal instructions. The foreign language can be learned through unorganized social interaction with the broader society. This means that the learner has access to the target language in the course of everyday communication or interaction with the environment. The sounds of the language are entrenched in a related situational context and the learner has the responsibility

to extract from this material the rules for the use of the language. This interaction allows him to start learning and learning in turn allows him to make progress in communication (Albakri, 2006).

Three components are required in learning a second foreign language: first, there should be an input; second, the input will produce a response also known as the output and lastly feedback which will be given according to the output. These three major components make up an interaction. The interaction approach attempts to account for learning through a learner's exposure to language, production of language, and feedback on that production. The interaction approach exposes the learners to the language, the production of language, and the feedback on that production. There is a central claim from past researches that even though social interaction may not be strictly necessary, it, however, constitutes the primary means by which language learners obtain data for language learning, not only because the interaction is how most learners receive input, but also because the input obtained through interaction is more realistic and favourable to acquisition than input received in other ways (Gass & Mackey, 2007). In essence, social interaction cannot be overemphasized in the learning of a second foreign language as it provides a threshold on which the acquisition of the language is made possible.

Methodology

This study adopts the quantitative research design. In this research, design data is collected and analysed using numerical figures and aided by mathematical software (Fischler, 2020). In other words, quantifiable data is collected from participants of the study and analysed with the aid of statistical tools.

Population and Sample Size

Students of History and International Relation at Edo University, Iyamho, Nigeria were selected for this study because the French language is a core course in their studies at 100 and 200 Levels. Consequently, the population of this study is the total number of 100 and 200 Levels students of History and International Relations at Edo University, Iyamho, Nigeria as of the 2019/2020 academic session as shown below:

100 Level Students	14
200 Level Students	13
Total	**27**

According to Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sampling sizes for different populations of research, for a population between 20 and 29, 19 is the required sample size. Since the population of students of 100 and 200 Levels of History and International Relations at Edo University, Iyamho, Nigeria is 27, a questionnaire was sent to all the students for their response and 22 responded. 22 represents 116% of the required sample size of the study which makes the reliability very high. Therefore, the sample size for this study is 22.

Sampling Technique

A questionnaire with 9 semi-structured questions was designed for this study to which participants were requested to respond (see Appendix I). The questionnaire was distributed to all the twenty-seven (27) 100 and 200 Level students of History and International Relations at Edo University, Iyamho, Nigeria who have studied French for at least one semester with a Grade. 22 students responded to the questionnaire. The questionnaire was prepared online via Google Form and the link to the questionnaire was sent to the students via their group WhatsApp platforms to which all the French language students were to click and respond accordingly. The link was sent to the students to respond to between 24 October and 15th November 2020.

Data Presentation and Analysis

S/no		**Population of French Students**	**Sample size**	**Percentage (%)**
1.	100 Level	14	13	59
2.	200 Level	13	9	41
	Total	**27**	**22**	**100%**

Table 1: Research Respondents based on their level of study.

Research Question 1

To what degree do Edo University students prefer French to other foreign languages?

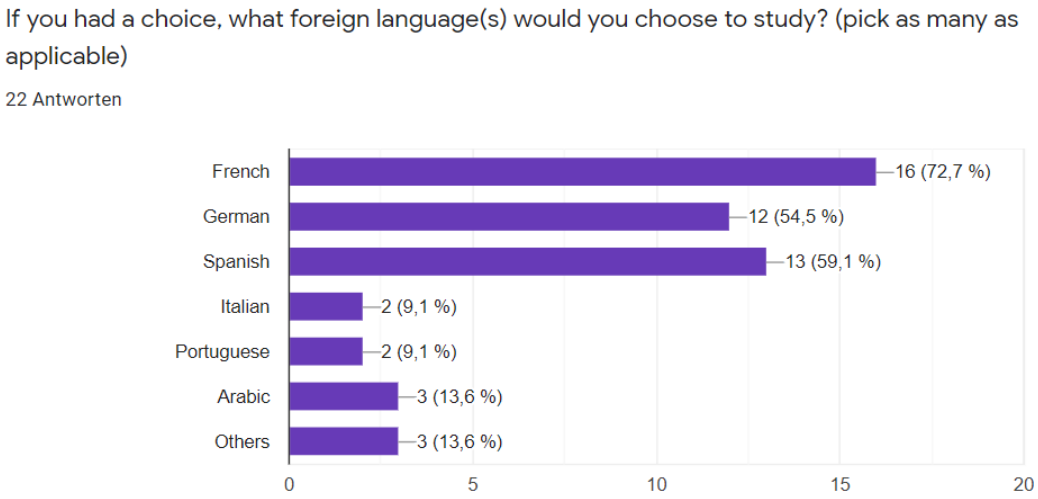

Figure 1: Research Respondents foreign language preference.

Figure 1 above shows that students would prefer French (73%) to other foreign languages. Italian and Portuguese languages (9%) are the least preferred by the respondents.

Research Question 2

What is the degree of Edo University students' performance in their last French Examination?

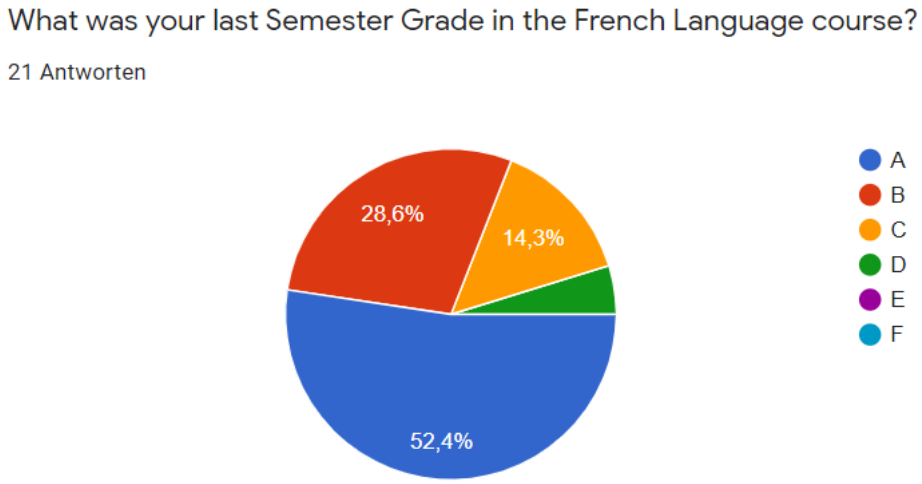

Figure 2: Respondents' semester Grade performance in the French Language.

Figure 2 above indicate that majority of the students studying the French language have very good grades (81%), meaning that 4 out of every 5 French language students have either an A or a B in the French language semester examination. The failure rate is very insignificant (4.7%).

Research Question 3

To what extent can Edo University students communicate in the French language?

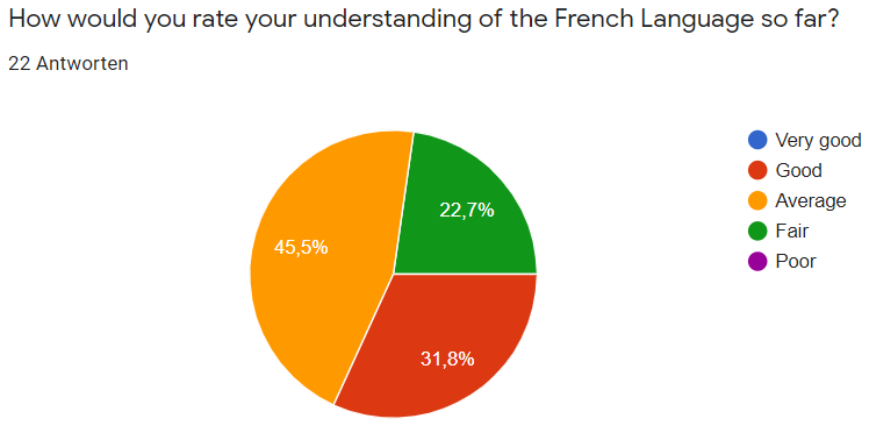

Figure 3: Respondents' understanding of the French Language.

In Figure 2, 81% of students scored an A or a B in the French language. In Figure 3 a significant number of students said their understanding of the French language is average (46%), meaning 2 out of every 4 students have an average understanding of the French language with an approximately 1 out of every 3 French language students having a good understanding of the French language.

Research Question 4

To what extent would Edo University students continue the learning of the French language after graduation?

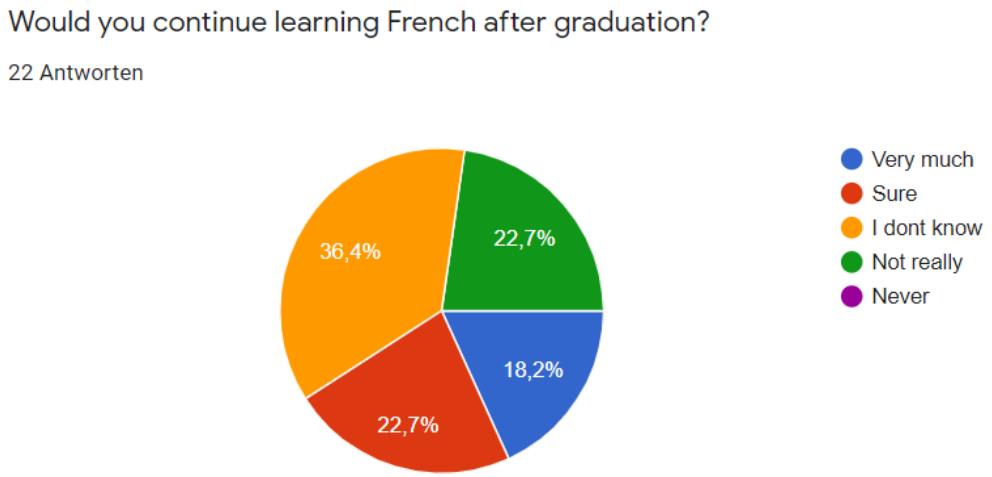

Figure 4: Respondents' willingness to continue to learn the French Language after graduation.

Although in Figure 1, 73% of students prefer the French language to other foreign languages, in Figure 4 only 41% of the students would want to continue to learn the French language after graduation. This implies that only 2 out of every 5 students would be interested in further learning the French language after graduation.

Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

Nigerian students of History and International Relations students prefer the French language to other foreign languages, namely 2 out of every 3 students of History and International Relations prefer to study the French language if given the option

to choose from a range of foreign languages. Italian and Portuguese languages least preferred by the students.

4 out of every 5 French language students of History and International relations have either an A or a B in the French language semester examination with an insignificant poor grade of 5%. However, an A or B grade in examinations does not necessarily translate to an understanding of the language as approximately 2 out of every 4 students have an average understanding of the French language. Only approximately 1 out of every 3 French language students have a good understanding of the French language.

Finally, even though many students (73%) scored high grades in the French language semester examinations only 2 out of every 5 students would be interested in further learning the French language after graduation.

The social learning theory emphasizes interaction as a key component of learning a foreign language (Young, 1999; Gass, 2003). In the study, although the students interacted with each other and the tutor, their understanding was still average which thus necessitates deeper interaction with speakers of the language. This gap may have accounted for the average understanding in comparison to the high examination grades the students had.

In conclusion, students of history and International students prefer French to other foreign languages. Also, the students of the French language perform well in their french language semester examinations but have an average understanding of the language. However, many French language students are not interested in learning the french language after graduation.

Based on the foregoing conclusion, the following can be recommended:

1. Students of the French language should be exposed to didactic materials like language laboratory and audiovisual equipment in addition to classroom teaching. This is to help the students advance in the four domains of the language, namely: speaking, listening, reading and writing.
2. Students of the French language should be given more time for practice. Since the French language is rarely spoken outside of the classroom in Nigeria, more time should be allotted to them for extracurricular activities which will be done with the use of the French Language.

3. Authorities should assist financially those studying the language in the form of scholarship or excursion to French-speaking countries for proper interactions with the native speakers. This will in turn boost their morale in learning the language and will go a long way in their efficiency in the four domains of the language.

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