

Perception and Attitude of Students toward the Learning and Teaching of French Language as a General Course in Universities: Afe Babalola University as a Case Study

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Abstract

Attitude and perception of learners determine how they learn a target language. The perceived importance of the language also determines the way the learner learns it. However, this study aims at examining the perception and attitude of students of Afe Babalola University, Ado-Ekiti (ABUAD) towards the teaching and learning of French language as a general course. The descriptive survey research was employed and a self-structured modified questionnaire was used to elicit information from respondents. A total of two hundred and seven (207) undergraduate students of ABUAD were surveyed by a simple random sampling technique. Upon the completion of data, it was analyzed, computed, and tabulated using frequency counts and percentage. The findings suggest that the respondents are aware of the importance and benefits of learning French language. This is reflected in the fairly positive attitude shown towards the teaching and learning of French language as a general course.

Keywords: French language, Perception, Attitude, General course, Nigerian Universities.

Introduction

French language is an international language. According to Emordi (2013:3), French language is the 11th most spoken language in the world. It is one of the most important romance languages, outnumbered only by Spanish and Portuguese. French language is an official language or administrative language in several communities and organizations of the world like European Parliament (EP), United Nations (UN), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), World Health Organization (W.H.O). African organizations like Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), African Union (AU), as well as many other sub-regional organizations which Nigeria is a member; all of which give the language a place of pride.

Nigeria, being a West African country is surrounded by a number of francophone countries viz Chad Republic in the North-East, Benin Republic in the South West, Cameroun in the East and Niger Republic in the North Central and North East regions respectively. The Economic Community of West African States which Nigeria is a part of, has twelve (12) of her member states out of the sixteen (16) speak French language. In actual fact, French language is the official language of the formidable body. One of the major aims of the ECOWAS is to unite and govern the economic affairs of its sixteen member states (Araromi 2009:5). Thus, the need to learn French language arose in the heart of the Nigerian Government.

French language gained entrance into West African countries in the course of the colonial period, and most of the francophone African countries gained their political independence around the same year that Nigeria obtained hers. According to Adelekan (1983), Nigeria after independence also helped to found the Organization of African Unity (O.A.U) now called African Union (A.U) and the Charter of O.A.U was signed on the 26th May, 1963 in Addis Ababa by all the then thirty-two (32) independent African nations. Adelekan (1983) also asserts that "Nigeria concluded diplomatic relations and treaties stating that French was one of the two world languages of international communication." We can therefore assume that this was the first formal attempt of our closeness to French language as a nation.

French language has been taught in Nigeria since 1859. It was among the earliest subjects introduced in the first secondary school (the Church Missionary Society Grammar school) founded in Lagos in 1859. Also, French language was one of the subjects offered in the Wesleyan High School and Training Institute, Lagos which was founded in 1878. Kings College, Lagos founded in 1909 also taught French language as an optional subject. (Omolewa 1971, cited by Emordi 2009:6)

Subsequently, French language was promoted in Nigeria by the Nigerian government. The educational system of Nigeria encourages the teaching and learning of French language in schools. The National Policy on Education (NPE 2004:10) asserts this by stating that:

For smooth interaction with our neighbors, 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.

Following this policy, French language was introduced to the school curriculum in the country. French language was to be taught in primary schools, specifically primaries 4, 5, and 6 respectively while it was made compulsory for junior secondary schools and an optional subject at senior secondary level. At the tertiary level, French is being offered as a major course and it is also taken as an elective course for students in departments like English Language, Linguistics, Law, International Relations, etc. Recently, French language is offered as a general studies course in some universities in Nigeria like Lagos State University (LASU), Madonna University, Covenant University, Babcock University, Kwara State University, Afe Babalola University, to mention but a few. Thus, the teaching and learning of French language is now gaining grounds in some Nigerian universities.

However, this study sets out to investigate students' perception and attitude towards the learning and teaching of French language in Nigerian Universities as a general course, taking Afe

Babalola University as a case study. To this end, the study will take a cursory look at the entity of French language course at Afe Babalola University, Ado-Ekiti (ABUAD).

French Language Course in ABUAD

As previously said, French language is offered as a general course in some universities in Nigeria, majorly the private universities, a category which ABUAD falls into. The teaching of this language and its layout differs from one university to another. In ABUAD, French language is being offered as a general course by students right from the first year to the third year irrespective of their main course of study. For the first year students, they offer the course in their second semester, and it is titled "Language Acquisition I", where no unit/credit is allotted to it. In their second year, the students still offer the course in their first semester and it is titled "Language Acquisition II" with no credit/unit allotted to it as well. Same also goes for the third year students who offer the course in their first semester. For all the levels, the course is scheduled for one hour per week, and the students are required to pass the course. At graduation, a certificate is issued to them to show their knowledge in the language alongside an indigenous language and Chinese language certificates.

Unlike other universities where French is offered as a general course, it appears that it is only in ABUAD that students offer this course up till their third year in school and the unfortunate thing is that no credit/unit is allotted to the course. Therefore, it poses a challenge to the seriousness of the students toward the course which reflects sometimes in low class attendance. This also manifests in the attitude of students toward the course with increasing failure rate recorded in the course at all levels. However, this study sets out to explore and examine the perception and attitude of the students toward the course.

Trends in attitudes and perceptions towards language learning

A lot of studies have been conducted on attitudes and perception towards language learning with various dimensions over the years across the world such as attitude towards different languages (Lefebvre, 2012); attitude towards Mother Tongue (e.g. Tuwakham, 2005); attitude towards a second or foreign language (Sk.Abdullah al Manun et al, 2012; Enongene, 2013; Alleyne et al, 2010); attitude towards national language ; attitude towards varieties of languages and attitudes towards language and language learning at secondary and tertiary levels.

According to Hayashi (2005) as reported by Lefebvre (2012) in her study on "Japanese English Bilingual Children in Three Different Educational Environments" in United States which was conducted via participant observation and informal interviews, children develop good attitudes toward bilingualism if they think bilingualism is an advantage for them. (1030). Her study also reveals that students' attitudes are important and they influence the acquisition process, their attitudes also have implications on eventual success in the endeavour.

Similarly, Lefebvre (2012) conducted a research on "student attitudes toward multilingual education" in a public French Immersion elementary school in the Pacific Northwest I with the third grade students at the school. Her study was child-based, and she administered questionnaires to the students and their parents and she also conducted a focus group discussion. From her study, it was deduced that children's experience and perceptions matter a lot whether or not they correlate

with outcomes. According to Lefebvre, students' fear of failure and experience of shame when learning a new language can leave them feeling ambivalent toward French at best, and can cause them to attribute their failure to French even when inappropriate at worst... student attitudes could be best described as occurring at the intersection of learned value and lived experience".(87).

Alleyne Lisa et al (2010) investigated the perceptions of and attitudes toward French L2 learning opportunities on-and-off campus among students not specializing in French at Glendon. Through questionnaire and interviews, they found out that students lack motivation in terms of French as a second language (FRSL) and the lack of motivation also affects professors in teaching and in other way that constrains teachers in the classroom as well. From their study, it was learnt that Glendon students do not have the time to put into their French courses because they are focusing on the courses for their major subject. The students do not make French a priority since they perceived that learning French would not require the same attention as is needed for their major courses. They were prompted to analyze the students' attitudes towards French because they realized that the way one perceives and acts towards a language largely influences how successful a language learner will be. However, they found out that the students came in with the perception that learning French at Glendon will be easy, and their negative attitudes began to form when classes are not easy and when they found out that they are not immersed in a bilingual campus. And as a result, students are not committed to learning FRSL, which makes teaching difficult for professors, leading to increasingly unmotivated, uninterested and discouraged teachers and students. The study's objective was however to create awareness that French as a second language (FRSL) classroom is not the only space that should be used for students' language learning. That there is need to explore other avenues/opportunities outside classroom such as Salon Francophone, summer immersion classes, internets, radio, television, etc.

Sk.Abdullah al Manun et al (2012), in their study focused on the attitude of undergraduate students of Life Science School of Khulna University towards English language. Seventy nine undergraduate students from seven departments were surveyed. It was revealed that the students have positive attitude to English language course which they study compulsorily as part of the foreign language acquisition policy of Bangladesh. The students reported that they recognized the global status and importance of English language in this era of globalization and global communication network. Conclusion was made that the positive attitudes of the students towards English language could be attributed to the fact that they were instrumentally motivated towards English.

In a similar perspective, Enogene (2013) also conducted a study on the attitudes learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) at Yaoundé 1 University in Cameroon. 966 students and 27 teachers were examined and it was revealed that learners' negative attitudes towards English could be accounted for by teachers' practices. That is, the type of activities introduced in the classroom can influence learners to develop negative or positive attitudes towards English. His study further argues that teachers' inability to adapt the physical and social realities to meet learners' expectations in the learning process is the result of three main factors: i) inadequate training, ii) confusion about what the course purports to offer, iii) the purpose and nature of language learning. He recommended that the way input is presented to learners should invite their attention.

Ojo, O.O and Abibu, A.A (2013) also surveyed the attitudes of Afe Babalola University students to General Studies courses. In their study, 187 undergraduate students were examined across the colleges in the school with the aid of questionnaire. The results revealed there was no significant difference in the attitude of male and female students toward GST courses. Also, in their findings respondents affirmed that class size has influence on the attitude of students towards GST courses. They recommended that class size need to be reduced for more effective results and also students should be more involved in the teaching-learning process.

However, with so many studies on attitudes and perceptions of students towards language courses and general courses at large, no study has been done on attitudes and perceptions of ABUAD students towards French language as a general course. To this end, this study sets out to examine Afe Babalola University students' attitudes and perceptions towards the learning of French language as a general course, relating these as challenges to the teaching and learning of the language.

Statement of problem

The undergraduate students of Afe Babalola University, Ado-Ekiti compulsorily study French language as a general course from 100 level to 300 level. Their attitude toward the teaching and learning of the language depends to a large extent on their perceived importance and benefits of French language in this era of globalization. Attitude and perception of ABUAD students towards the teaching and learning of French language has not been surveyed before. Thus it is of relevance to investigate and explore the perception and attitude of the students towards the teaching and learning of the language.

Objectives of the study

This study therefore seeks to;

- 1) Explore ABUAD students' perception of the learning of French language as a general course, and
- 2) Examine their attitudes toward the learning of the language as a general course.

Significance of the study

This study will identify some challenges faced in learning French language as a general course in respect to the attitude and perception of the students toward the language as a foreign language. The findings of this study might provide useful data for National University Commission NUC, National Policy Implementation Group, Ministry of Education, University management and lecturers with which to design appropriate intervention and measures for the improvement of teaching and learning of French language as a general course in universities.

Research questions

- 1) Do ABUAD students perceive the importance of French language learning?
- 2) Are the students' attitudes towards the learning and teaching of the language as a general course negative or positive?

Methodology

In order to study the attitudes and perceptions of students towards French language as a general course in ABUAD, a questionnaire was developed with 20 items designed to measure students' attitudes and perception towards the learning of French language as a general course. A five point Likert Scale with strongly agree; agree; disagree; strongly disagree; and undecided, was used from main items. The questionnaire survey method was preferred because it is suitable for empirical research, the method offers greater anonymity to the informants and the data collected through the method is easily quantifiable. The questionnaire was prepared by the researcher adapting ideas from instrument of previous studies (e.g. Enongene, 2013; Sk. Abdullah al Manun et al, 2012) and modified according to the objectives of the study.

The questionnaire was administered upon a sample of two hundred and seven undergraduate students of Afe Babalola University, Ado-Ekiti, a private university situated in the south-western region of Nigeria. The sample was selected randomly from 200 level and 300 level students of all the colleges in the university. The choice of the 200 level and 300 level students was based on the fact that they have undertaken a complete semester of French language course in the school as of the time the research was conducted. The colleges are; Law, Engineering, Social and Management Sciences, Medical and Health Sciences, and Sciences. It is important to mention that no significant variation in learners' opinion could be attributed to particular departments. Upon the collection of data, these were analyzed, computed and tabulated using SPSS. The percentage values and frequencies were computed through descriptive statistics.

Results and Discussion

TABLE 1: Distribution of Respondents by Age

Age	Frequency	Percentage
14-16	8	3.9
17-20	174	84.0
21-25	25	12.1
26 and above	Nil	-
TOTAL	207	100

TABLE 2: Distribution of Respondents by Sex.

Sex	Frequency	Percentage
Male	66	31.9
Female	141	68.1
Total	207	100

TABLE 3: Distribution of Respondents by College

College	Frequency	Percentage
Engineering	43	20.8
Law	44	21.3
Medical & Health sciences	53	25.6
Sciences	23	11.0
Social & Management Sciences	44	21.3
Total	207	100

TABLE 4: Distribution of Respondents by Ethnicity

Ethnic group	Frequency	Percentage
Hausa	14	6.8
Igbo	81	39.1
Yoruba	112	54.1
Total	207	100

TABLE 5: Distribution by level at which French has been offered previously by respondents

	ITEMS	YES	%	NO	%
1.	Did you offer French in Primary school?	123	59.4	84	40.6
2.	Did you offer French in Junior secondary school?	150	72.5	57	27.5
3.	Did you offer French in Senior Secondary School?	101	48.8	106	51.2

In the table 1 above, out of the 207 respondents, 8 (3.9%) were of the age 14-16 years, 174 (84.0%) were between the age range 17-20years, while 25 (12.1%) were of age range 21-25 years and there were no respondents of age 26 and above. Table 2 reveals that 66 respondents which represent 31.9% of the population were male and 141 (68.1%) were female. Table 3 shows that 43 respondents (20.8%) were from Engineering College, 44 (21.3%) were from College of Law, 53 respondents (25.6%) were from College of Medical & Health sciences, also 23 (11.0%) were from sciences, and 44 respondents which represent 21.3% of the population were from College of Social and Management Sciences. From table 4, it was revealed that 112 respondents which represent 54.1% of the population were Yoruba, while 14 (6.8%) were Hausa and 81 (39.1%) were Igbo. Table 5 reveals that 59.4% of the population offered French at the primary school level, 72.5% of the respondents offered the language at Junior Secondary School, while just 48.8% of them offered it only at Senior Secondary School.

TABLE 6: ABUAD Students' perception of learning and teaching French as a general course

S/N	Statements	SA	%	A	%	D	%	SD	%	UN	%
1.	French language is one of the most spoken languages in the world	55	26.6	102	49.3	16	7.7	24	11.6	10	4.8
2.	French language is of great benefit to me	42	20.3	93	45	27	13.0	22	10.6	23	11.1
3.	The learning and knowledge of French language will give me an edge over my colleagues in the labour market	62	30.0	112	54.1	11	5.3	10	4.8	12	5.8
4.	We need to increase the use of French language in this era of globalization	38	18.4	98	47.3	24	12.0	20	9.7	27	13.0
5.	French should not be made compulsory in ABUAD	25	12.1	15	7.2	52	25.1	73	35.3	42	20.3
6.	Speaking French is an advantage	105	50.7	73	35.3	7	3.4	9	3.4	13	6.3
7.	French language should be made compulsory to only Arts and Social & Management Sciences students	16	7.7	32	15.5	93	45.0	59	28.5	7	3.4
8.	French language is difficult to learn	52	25.1	43	20.8	92	44.4	16	7.7	4	1.9

TABLE 7: Attitudes of ABUAD students towards French language as a general course

S/N	Statements	SA	%	A	%	D	%	SD	%	UN	%
9.	I take my French classes seriously	22	10.6	90	43.5	65	31.4	17	8.2	13	6.3
10.	I would like to study more French	44	21.3	53	25.6	65	31.4	31	14.9	14	6.8
11.	I do not attend French classes regularly because I feel it is not important	27	13.0	39	18.8	93	44.9	33	15.9	15	7.2
12.	I definitely take my departmental courses more seriously than my French classes	119	57.5	88	43.5	0	0	0	0	0	0
13.	The size of the French class discourages me from attending classes	27	13.0	38	18.4	74	35.7	23	11.1	45	21.7
14.	The course contents are not motivating enough to learn the language	24	11.6	40	19.3	113	54.6	17	8.2	13	6.3
15.	The time allotted to the course is not efficient	17	8.2	12	5.8	83	40.1	72	34.8	23	11.1
16.	The number of unit/credit allotted to French course negatively influence my attitude towards it	55	26.6	63	30.4	34	16.4	51	24.6	4	1.9
17.	I am not encouraged to attend French classes because I don't find it interesting	43	20.8	107	51.7	53	25.6	4	1.9	0	0
18.	I am doing this course only because it is a school requirement	37	17.9	95	45.9	43	20.8	27	13.0	5	2.4
19.	Previous encounter with French language negatively affected my attitude towards French classes in ABUAD	11	5.3	59	28.5	87	42.0	43	20.8	7	3.4
20.	The teaching and learning of Nigerian indigenous languages and another foreign language alongside French poses a challenge to my learning of French in ABUAD	79	38.2	42	20.3	38	18.4	31	15.0	17	8.2

NOTE: SA=Strongly agree, A=agree, D=Disagree, SD=Strongly disagree, UN=Undecided.

According to the results on table 6 above, it is evident that the students perceive that French is widely spoken in the world, 26.6% strongly agreed, 49.3% also agreed to this statement. 20.3% strongly agreed and 45% agreed that French language is of great benefit to them. Similarly, majority of the respondents (30% strongly agreed and 54.1% agreed) admitted that the knowledge and learning of French language will give them an edge over their colleagues in the labour market. With a similar percentage of frequency (18.4% strongly agreed and 47.3% agreed), they responded that there is need for an increase in use of French language in this era of globalization. However, majority of the respondents (25.1% disagreed and 35.3% strongly disagreed) refuted the claim the French should not be made compulsory in ABUAD. Furthermore, the study reveals that majority of the students (50.7% and 35.3%) opined that speaking of French language is an advantage to them, and majority (45.0% disagreed and 28.5% strongly disagreed) also refuted the claim that French should only be made compulsory to arts and social and management sciences students. 44.4% disagreed and 7.7% strongly disagreed that French is difficult to learn.

Table 7 reveals the attitudes of the students towards French language course in ABUAD. More than half of the respondents (10.6% strongly agreed and 43.5% agreed) admitted taking French classes seriously, while, 21.3% strongly agreed and 25.6% agreed that they would like to learn more French. The study further reveals that majority (44.9% disagreed and 15.9% strongly disagreed) attend classes because they feel it is important. However, all the respondents opine (57.5% strongly agreed and 42.5%) that they take their departmental courses more seriously than their French classes. As regards the class size, only 13.0% strongly agreed and 18.4% agreed that it discourages them from attending classes, while over 46% (35.7% disagreed and 11.1% strongly disagreed) disagreed with the claim. Majority of the respondents (54.6% disagreed and 8.2% strongly disagreed) are of the opinion that the course contents are motivating enough to learn the language while over 30% claimed the course contents are not motivating enough. Majority of the respondents (40.1% disagreed and 34.8% strongly disagreed) are of the opinion that the time allotted to the course is efficient having refuted the claim that the time is not efficient. However, more than half of the respondents (26.6% strongly agreed and 30.4% agreed) opine that the non-allocation of units/credits to the course negatively influence their attitude towards the course. Majority (20.8% strongly agreed and 51.7% agreed) reports that they do not find the French classes interesting and thereby not encouraged to attend classes. Even though majority of the respondents are of the opinion that French should be made compulsory in ABUAD, majority of the respondents (17.9% strongly agreed and 45.9% agreed) still reports that they are only offering the course because it is a school requirement. Over 62% (42.0% disagreed and 20.8% strongly disagreed) are of the opinion that their previous encounter with French did not negatively influence their attitude towards the French classes in ABUAD. Finally, most of the respondents (38.2% strongly agreed and 20.3% agreed) report that the teaching and learning of an indigenous language and another foreign language alongside with French language in ABUAD poses a challenge to their learning of French.

Conclusion

The primary interest of the study was to explore and examine students' perception and attitude towards the learning and teaching of French language as a general course in ABUAD. The study

revealed the awareness level of the students on the importance and benefits of learning French language and also the attitude of the students towards the learning of the language. Therefore, the teaching and learning of French should be encouraged at tertiary level in Nigeria since it has been stated that French is the second official language of the country.

Recommendation

- French language should be made compulsory from primary school up to senior secondary school so that the students are not cut off suddenly. Subsequently, the continuous learning of French language should be encouraged up to tertiary level. However, the policy implementation group should ensure all schools comply with the policy of French being taught from primary four up to secondary level.
- French language courses in ABUAD should be allotted units/credits, and thereby the number of lecture hours be increased per week.
- Lecturers should improve on their course contents to enhance the effective learning of French language.

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