



2nd FPISMS International Conference <https://sms2interconf.federalpolyilaro.edu.ng>

French Language Education and Sustainable Development: The Constraints, Prospects and Perception of Polytechnic Undergraduates. (A case study of The Federal Polytechnic, Ilaro.)

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Abstract

Language as a tool for communication is very vital for every human being regardless of their professional or societal standing. In a world that is consistently becoming more connected, learning new languages is no longer an option, but should be considered a norm. Considered to be one of the powerful languages of the world in terms of diplomacy, politics and technology, the ability to speak the French language opens up numerous opportunities for Nigerian polytechnic graduates. Although French language education has been introduced into polytechnics in Nigeria, there is still a long way to go in ensuring that students do actually acquire the ability to converse in the language. This paper examines the perceptions of students of Federal Polytechnic, Ilaro to French language, while identifying challenges that students face in the learning of French language. Findings indicate that students encounter major challenges in the aspects of pronunciation and certain concepts that are foreign to the English language. However, sustained support from lecturers help them to overcome these challenges. It was also discovered that having an understanding of the possible benefits of French language motivates students to learn. The paper gives recommendations on how to ensure sustained interest for practical results in French language classes.

Keywords: Development, Education, French Language, Motivation, Technology.

Introduction

As the world becomes much more connected, through various digital and technological inventions, the ability to communicate in languages classified as “international” becomes much more necessary for sustainable development. The ability to speak more than one “international” language benefits not just the individual, but all other economies attached to the individual. The French language, as one of the most widely spoken languages in the world, affords the opportunity for better prospects and a wider access to worldwide opportunities. Either in economy, politics, technology and other emerging world issues, the French language is a viable tool for sustainable development.

Polytechnic education, tailored towards meeting specific technological goals for sustainable development can and should integrate language education in their curriculum in order to empower their graduates. Nwaukoni and Ezeamaka (2024) note that acquiring mastery in a second foreign language are viable tools for solving Nigeria's economic crisis. They also point out that the ability to speak French language provides a "solid profile" that enables graduates of polytechnics to surmount challenges they may encounter in an evolving world. Gella & Kwaja, (2017) point out that acquiring French language skills will go a long way in making graduates "marketable" within and outside the borders of their immediate communities. With many francophone countries making giant strides in technological development, acquiring French language skills ensures that polytechnic graduates in Nigeria are able to access relevant professional and technological opportunities that would in turn benefit Nigeria.

Despite the many benefits of the French language for polytechnic graduates, there seems to be a continual nonchalance towards French language education in Polytechnics. This dismissive attitude towards French language could stem from an inadequate understanding of the prospects of French language for polytechnic graduates. Other possible challenges that face French language education as has been pointed out by researchers such as (Odiboh & Odafe, 2020) also include non-implementation of policies that support the growth of French language teaching in Nigerian institutions. Student's poor perception of the language has also been touted as one of the causes of the poor implementation of French language education in polytechnics in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This work is based on the motivational theory of language education, focusing on how student's perception of French language can help or impede their acquisition of the language. The paper also uses a descriptive analysis of responses from a selected number of French language students in The Federal Polytechnic, Ilaro to understand their perception of the French language courses offered in the campus.

Motivation is an "internal process that can't be directly observed but that activates, guides and maintains overt behaviour" (Tranquillo & Stecker, 2016). For every human endeavour as with learning a new language, there is a need for motivation. Several factors can either motivate or demotivate a person, but the level of motivation goes a long way in determining if any success will be recorded on a particular endeavour. (Lepper, Greene & Nisbett, 1973) point out that motivation "directs and energizes" human behaviour. According to (Ai, Pan & Zhong, 2021) a motivated individual is more likely to show persistence and attention to a task at hand regardless of the challenges that surface. A motivated individual would expend energy and is prepared to surmount difficulties that may arise from pursuing their specific goal.

Motivation can be gathered from either internal or external factors. Whereas external factors may push an individual for a while, there is the likelihood that when the external factor no longer exists, the individual will return to status quo. Four major types of motivation as pointed out by (Ai et al, 2021) include: intrinsic, extrinsic, integrative and instrumental. Whereas intrinsic motivation is derived from an inner force that propels the learner to want to learn, extrinsic motivation is driven by a desire to get a reward such as high scores, recognition etc. Integrative motivation is a result of a desire to be socially relevant and accepted by a community, while instrumental motivation stems from a desire to advance career and academic prospects. For learners of French language,

each one of these types of motivation singly or combined will inform how much of the language they actually learn.

According to Gardner's theory of motivation, the social milieu of a learner greatly impacts how they are able to learn a new language. For learners who have little or no source of motivation from their immediate communities, learning a foreign language would require that they are able to dig inwards for internal drive towards their language goals. In a country such as Nigeria with English language as the most common language, learners of French language would require a high dose of motivation – internal and external, to successfully learn the language. While there is little the teacher of the school can do to create an inner drive by students, providing relevant resources for learning, allocating enough time for French language classes and training and re-training French language instructors would serve as a source of external motivation for learners. Providing these external motivators could help learners find the inner drive to apply themselves diligently to their French Language course.

Although French language is taught across all departments in the Federal Polytechnic, Ilaro, respondents for this work were drawn from the departments of Business Administration, Mass Communication, Tourism Management and Office Technology Management. These departments by virtue of their professional prospects are considered “more likely” to make professional use of the French language after graduation. It is assumed that students in these departments who can easily perceive a future benefit for learning French language in their career prospects, are more likely to be motivated to put in the work required to learn.

Results and Findings

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of research questions

S/N	ITEMS	X	STD
RQ1	What are the challenges students face in learning French language in polytechnics?		
1	We don't have adequate French learning resources that can make learning French easy for the students in my school.	2.22	.803
2	I am not interested in learning and offering French language.	2.16	.791
3	The time allocated for the study of French in my school is not enough for us to learn French language.	2.31	.838
4	I have seen or heard other polytechnic students complain about learning French in school.	2.56	.886
5	We are encouraged by the French lecturers to learn French.	3.25	.610
6	I have access to different digitals and learning platforms that can help me learn to speak and write in French language.	2.52	.736
	Weighted Mean	2.50	

RQ2	What is the perception of polytechnic students about the study of French language?		
7	I like the inclusion of French language in my coursework.	2.94	.647
8	I devote enough time to the study of French as I do for my main coursework.	2.85	.627
9	Learning a Foreign language like French makes a student prepared for international experience.	3.23	.592
10	Learning French in the polytechnic has enabled me to speak and write in French language.	2.91	.613
11	Including French language as a course for polytechnic students is not necessary.	2.23	.824
12	Polytechnic programmes may not be standard and/or worthwhile if students don't learn French language as part of their general studies.	2.58	.822
	Weighted Mean	2.79	
RQ3	What is the level of awareness and view of French language and its prospects for sustainable development?		
13	Speaking French language can assist my career, especially in getting (international or local) jobs.	3.15	.653
14	Social interactions between Nigeria and French countries can be possible and strengthened if Nigerians can speak French language.	3.13	.615
15	I am aware that French language is the second official language of Nigeria.	2.85	.722
16	I can contribute to the development of Nigeria by learning French language.	2.88	.679
17	Speaking French as a second language can help an individual gain several human developments through mental flexibility.	3.11	.593
18	French language contributes to the economic development of Nigeria.	2.75	.698
	Weighted Mean	2.97	

The table above shows the mean and standard deviation for the research questions. The table shows there are adequate French learning resources that can make learning of French easy. Also, the weighted mean for research question one is 2.50 which is equivalent to the criterion mean value of 2.5. This means the students are aware and can put the challenges students face in learning French language into applicable perspectives. Despite some students complain about learning French language in polytechnic ($x=2.56$), the result shows that students are encouraged by their lecturers to learn French ($x=3.25$).

Data from research question two indicated that students appreciated the inclusion of French language in their coursework ($x=2.94$). This is explicitly supported by their responses in other items under this research questions. Students devoted enough time for studying French as they do for other courses ($x=2.85$). The participants strongly believe that French language is necessary for polytechnic students, and that the polytechnic programmes may not be worthwhile if the general studies do not include French language ($x=2.58$). More importantly, participants show ($x=2.91$) that learning French language in the polytechnic has enabled them to speak and write in French language. With a greater mean of ($x=3.23$), the participants shows that French language prepares students for international experiences. The weighted mean of research question 2 is ($x=2.79$), this is above the criterion mean value of 2.5. This shows that the polytechnic students demonstrate a strong perception about the study of French language in polytechnics.

Research question three from the table above has the greatest mean value, 2.97. It shows the students level of awareness and view of French language and its prospects for sustainable development is high. The participants believe speaking French language can be useful to their careers especially at the international level ($x=3.15$). The participants also strongly believe, French language can strengthen the relationship between Nigerian and French speaking countries ($x=3.13$) and that speaking French language can help an individual gain several human developments through mental flexibility ($x=3.11$). The participants also strongly believe French language contributes to the economic development of Nigeria ($x=2.75$). They believe learning French language can enable them to contribute to the development of Nigeria ($x=2.88$).

Discussion

The findings of this study show that while undergraduates in the Federal Polytechnic, Ilaro have interest in learning the French language, challenges such as inadequate time allocation for the classes, a lack of sufficient learning resources and the novelty of the language pose a challenge to achieving the linguistic goal of being able to converse in French language. The students believed that a continued, sustained exposure to the language would go a long way in helping them learn to speak the language. According to respondents who are all students, the time allocated for lectures per week is sufficient, although the classes do not continue for more than a year in most cases. These findings are not in line with Gella & Kwaja (2017). Gella and Kwaja (2017) posit that the Nigerian education system does not give enough attention to the teaching and acquisition of French language in polytechnics, which affects how much students can learn the language for sustainable development.

The inclusion of French language in the polytechnic curriculum is necessary as this makes students to be proficient in writing and speaking French language. One may think, it may be extra load for the students, but this study shows that students devote sufficient time for the study of French language as they do for another course. It is believed that French language can make a graduate to be competitive in the international job markets.

Conclusively, polytechnic students have an elevated level of awareness and view about the prospects of French language for sustainable development. A country's sustainable development is achievable by their relationship with other nations and by the contributions of their citizens. This study revealed that speaking French language improves the prospects of an individual's career path at local and international levels, while also contributing to the development of Nigeria. This is justified by Marinze (2020) as the author notes that proficiency in French language will make a

polytechnic graduate competitive in the global market. It is believed that social interaction between two countries can be fostered by the language they speak, and French language remains a vital tool in fostering the relationships between Nigeria and neighbouring French countries. As the countries develop trade relationships, the economic development of Nigeria is developed, and this is credited to ability of Nigeria and her citizens to communicate in French language. These findings are in line with (Muotoo, 2016; Faniran, 2016; Lori & Okotete, 2017). Muotoo (2016) posits that the success or failure of the current integration in West Africa can be linked to the extent to which the Anglophone and Francophone countries in the sub-region can afford their citizens valuable English and French language programmes. Faniran (2016) asserted that French language is a base for commerce in the 21st century. Lori and Okotete (2017) conclude that French language fosters communication in international commerce and industry.

Conclusion

French language is a course offered in Nigerian polytechnics. Its inclusion in the curriculum should be valued and appreciated by the polytechnic students and lecturers. The students of the Federal Polytechnic, Ilaro have received continuous motivation to help them devote enough time to the study of French language and access valuable learning resources to enhance their proficiency in French language. The students strongly believe learning French and becoming bilingual will make them more competitive in the local and international job markets. Also, learning French by Nigerian citizens fosters Nigeria's relationship with the French speaking countries and contribute to economic development of the nation. Polytechnic French lecturers provide the students with required supports in learning the French language and the school provides learning infrastructures needed for the study of French language.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that:

1. The school authority should intensify efforts to continue to provide maximum support for the French lecturer's professional development.
2. Students who are not devoting enough attention or making little progress in the study of French should be provided relevant academic support.
3. There should be internship opportunities for students in French language related organizations to foster students' proficiency.

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