



Research Article

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French Language Teacher Trainees Perception of Pedagogical Content Knowledge in French Language

Dr. (Mrs.). J. E. Awanbor

Department of Curriculum and Instructional Technology
Faculty of Education, University of Benin, Benin City

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Abstract

The overall goal of this study was to find out French language teacher trainees perception of pedagogical content knowledge in French language. The study adopted a descriptive survey design. The population comprised of all 415 French undergraduate students' in the Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education and, the Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Arts of a Nigerian University. A total of 108 French students were selected from the population through a simple random sampling technique as the sample for the study. A likert type questionnaire with a four point scale was validated by three experts. Using the Cronbach Alpha statistic, a reliability coefficient of 0.75 was obtained. Data was analyzed using means and standard deviation and a criterion mean of 2.50 was used for acceptance and rejection. The results show that Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) is capable of developing French teacher trainees' competences in problem solving skills, erases possible misconceptions and erroneous reasoning, simulates the use of various representations and instruction of knowledge and helps in the development of proactive thinking, attitude and self-confidence. It was therefore, recommended that more methodology courses should be designed and implemented to help the trainees content knowledge as well as pedagogical content knowledge so that they can serve effectively as twenty first century language teachers.

Keywords: Perception, French language, Pedagogical content knowledge, Teacher Trainees

1. Introduction

The French language evolved and replaced Latin in the 17th century as the most important language of diplomacy and international relations until the 20th century when it was overtaken by the English language. Today the French language has spread all over the world to the extent that it is rated as the sixth most spoken language and second most learned after English in the world (OIF2014), It has 90.2 million speakers in Africa, and one of the working languages of so many international organizations such as the United Nations, (U.N) European Union, (E.U), African Union (A.U), and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) among others (Osawaru, 2017). The French language is a language that can be useful throughout the world and Werber (2008) ranked it as the second most influential language of the world. His criteria were not solely based on the numbers of those who speak it as first language (L1) but also on the numbers of those who speak it as a second language (L2). French is the only language other than English spoken on the five continent. Bloomberg business week (2011) deemed it to be one of the top three most useful languages for business behind English and Chinese.

Proficiency in both English and French as working languages is an asset for job placement in so many enterprise around the world (Institute Français du Nigéria, 2016). Porcher (1995:1) "asserts that French language is one of the most important languages of dissemination and the

network of teachers constitute today, even in this time of media, the most effective instrument of this language". Aire (2017) states that the French language is the meal ticket of hundreds of Nigerians and that the language can be more beneficial to the nation if teachers accept to accord it, what is called real autonomy as a discipline in which people can specialize and try to attain the utmost height possible.

The fact that Nigeria is surrounded by countries that use French as a second but official language is one of the major reasons that the Nigerian Government introduced the French language into her educational programmes. According to Onyemelekwu and Adie-Effiong cited by Gella and Kwaje (2017) Nigeria is an Anglophone country in a sea of Francophone countries. This is to say that Nigerians need the knowledge of French language to be able to relate and interact with neighbouring countries. The position of French in contemporary continental and international politics, economics orientation and technological development makes it necessary for the Nigerian Government to adopt the French language as a major language for keeping in contact with the African continent and most parts of the world.

In Nigeria the French language is taught in various levels of education, chief among which is: Departments of foreign languages in the Faculty of Arts and Faculties of Education in Universities, Colleges of Education, French language schools, Alliance Françaises etc. Only Faculties of Education and Colleges of Education produce trained teachers to teach in both the primary and secondary schools, and also in higher institutions. The Federal Government also established the French language village in Badagry which serves as an immersion center for the students learning the French language.

Many teachers of French in Nigeria are teachers who graduated from the Departments of Foreign Languages, Language Schools, Alliance Françaises but who initially had no intention to become teachers, but also who after the end of their studies, could not find employment. They become teachers of French by default and not by choice. They have acquired the linguistic content of the language but do not have the Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) that makes it possible to teach the French language effectively and for students to learn it effortlessly. In other words, they are not trained to teach the French language. According to Oluranti (2012), most of the teachers of French in Nigeria are not trained teachers.

A French teacher in Nigeria teaches in the primary, secondary schools, Colleges of Education and Universities. They also work in online language schools. This is why it is important for French teacher- trainees to grasp the Pedagogical Content Knowledge so that they can teach the language effectively. It is assumed that when they graduate from the university or college of education, they will become teachers of the language in different institutions.

1.1 Pedagogical content knowledge

PCK according to Shulma (1987) in Evens, Elen and Depaepe (2016)

"refers to the overlaps of information about subject knowledge, that is knowledge of the subject being taught and pedagogic knowledge, which is knowledge of how to teach (i.e. effective methods, strategies, techniques, planning, assessment, etc.). PCK is that special amalgam of content and pedagogy that is uniquely the province of teachers, their own special form of professional understanding". (p.188)

Walker (2012) on his part adopts Literacy Pedagogical Content Knowledge (LPCK), instead of PCK. He has the idea that different content areas have their educational practice that can be developed. For instance, courses, instructional materials, including approaches, and methods could be advanced for the teaching of the subject area. He describes LPCK as the awareness of how oral and written languages are organized for the acquisition of knowledge. Love, (2010) cited in (Evens et al. p188) "asserts that in language teaching, LPCK and PCK have the same meaning". Pompea and Walker (2017:1) view PCK as a continuity, and teachers achieve further when they go through proper education practice and that they acquire PCK in the cause of their pre-service training, and in the time of their teaching careers.

Even if a teacher knows the content of his or her subject, he or she still needs to have PCK

that will enable him or her meet the needs of students with different linguistic competences. This knowledge will include repertoire of approaches, methods, technics and activities which meet different learning styles or preferences. In addition to these, an understanding of what makes the learning of specific topics easy or difficult is important. PCK also include the ideas, assumptions, beliefs that students of different social cultural and educational backgrounds bring with them to school; PCK is the awareness of and competence to use the curriculum, good instructional materials for foreign language students and general understanding of, responses to various issues that face professional foreign language teachers. (Bilash, 2009). Thus, PCK is highly relevant in teacher training curriculum. It is the major issue in teacher preparation, assessment and certification.

1.2 *The importance of PCK in the Teacher Training Curriculum*

Kathiveloo, Puteh and Matematique (2014) “observe that PCK helps teacher to sequence their instruction in a workable way... And that a good idea of PCK also help teachers to understand their students thinking” (p6). PCK helps teachers to be more effective in teaching their subjects and it also makes the learning of the subject to be meaningful to the students. As an educational term, it describes several realms of knowledge that is very important to the educators in any institution of learning; which are subject specific content like French, knowledge of pedagogy which relate to how to teach the content; e.g. knowledge of the different methods and approaches and their relevance to the subject; contextual knowledge that frame the teaching is also important; which is the teaching situation of the subject and this include the availability of instructional materials that are useful to both the teachers and students etc. PCK is the super simplification of these different realms (Pompea & Walker, 2017). Therefore, adequate PCK is important in every teacher training curriculum.

In Nigeria the national curriculum makes it clear that French teacher trainees should be given subject matter competences. These include mastery of the French language; the different methods of teaching the French language; classroom management competencies such as setting a conducive environment suitable for learning the French language; assessing students; taking into consideration their different language backgrounds and knowing and practicing the general processes of teaching and learning the language. PCK is considered as a useful standard point for examining the knowledge base of pre-service foreign language (FL) teachers and also positively influences instructional quality and students learning, particularly the French teacher trainees in Nigeria.

PCK could develop French teacher trainees competence, helps to guide them in problem solving, to realize possible misconception and erroneous reasoning, to simulate the use of various representations, instructions of knowledge. PCK could also help French teacher trainees to develop creative thinking, to improve their attitude to French language and it's supposed to increase confidence among French teacher trainees. These are realized by the teacher-trainees through training, experiences and observation.

1.3 *The Concept of Perception*

Perception ordinarily means the way in which something is regarded, understood and interpreted. It also includes how we respond to information. The perception of foreign language teaching approaches, methods, activities and different language learning processes which form the subject matter of French language teacher training programmes are extremely valuable, because they are the factors that link the trainees' knowledge with theory during training. They also serve as bases for making the connection between theory and practice which is central to their professional development. Perception here means the way in which the French language is regarded, understood or interpreted by the French teacher-trainees. It also includes how the French teacher-trainees respond to the teaching and learning of the language. Finding out the French teacher-trainees perception of their preparedness and their Pedagogical Content knowledge will help to determine what is needed to improve the students learning and teaching practice processes.

Teacher quality is an important factor in determining gains in student's achievement. According to Solis (2009) "to teach all students to today's standards, teachers need to understand subject matter deeply and flexibly so that they can help students map their own ideas, relate one idea to another, and redirect their thinking to create powerful learning" (p4). If PCK is perceived negatively by French teacher trainees, the quality of their teaching will be negatively affected because teachers often teach the way they have been taught. Book, Byers, and Freeman (1983) assert that teachers always remember how they were taught in school as student trainees and this gives them sense of direction when they become teachers. In addition Solis (2009) suggests that, "what is needed is to orchestrate teacher learning opportunities that are centered on the specific ways of knowing and doing within given subjects or on PCK". (p4)

The National Policy on Education (NPE) indicates that French language is compulsory from primary four to Junior Secondary School level for every Nigerian child while in the Senior School Certificate Examination (SSCE) classes, it is a non-vocational elective causing many students to discontinue with the subject. This is one of the reasons, that enrollment in French language is low in the SSCE and in the application to study the language at the University level. Olaseinde (2017) noted that most of the secondary schools in Nigeria do not have French teachers. In addition, Gella, and Kwaje (2017) assert that most Nigerians see the study of French language as a waste of time, especially when they think of where to get employment after they leave the University. It is claimed that both the Federal and State Governments have stopped employing French language teachers for schools. Perhaps this attitude of Nigerians towards the study of French is due to the fact that they are not well informed by the Federal Government about the need for French as an important foreign language to be learnt by them.

Most students admitted into the Department of Educational Foundations and the Department of Foreign Languages in the University of Benin did not initially apply to study the French language. They were offered this admission through the Post University Tertiary Matriculation Examination. (PUTME). In recent times, in Nigeria, students are admitted through PUTME. It is a recognized admission screening examination that higher institutions in the country conduct for students who apply to their institutions for higher education. Each University conducts her PUTME, sets her cut-off marks which is usually 50% and above. For a candidate to take part in this examination, he or she must have written the Tertiary, University Matriculation Examination (TUME) and must have scored 160 and above out of 400 total scores. The score acceptable to institutions differ.

It is in this process of the screening exercise in the University of Benin that students who scored 50% and above but who could not get admitted into the courses they initially applied for are given admission to study other courses in the University, including French, not only the University of Benin, but also in some other Nigerian Universities. In the University of Benin, candidates who applied to read law but who could not obtain the cut off mark for the law programme are transferred to different Faculties and Departments especially to Foreign Languages Department, Department of Educational Foundations in the Faculty of Education to study French, or to the Department of Linguistics in the Faculty of Arts. This is probably the only way that the Universities can admit students into some of these Departments, Foreign Languages in particular. However, this is an indication that most of the students do not have this background knowledge in the French language. Some of them may have had contact with the language at the primary or secondary school levels but not to a reasonable extent, while some are just coming in contact with it for the first time in the University. This is because French language is a foreign language in Nigeria and a foreign language according to Osawaru (2018:16) "is a language largely learned in the classroom but not commonly spoken outside the school".

Based on these problems, this study set out primarily to find out the French teacher trainees perceptions of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK), experiences and the meaning they attach to it and whether they see it as essential and appropriate parts of learning for the teaching of the French language. Specifically, the study sought to find out:

1. Whether French teacher trainees perceive their training as capable of developing their competences.
2. If French teacher trainees see PCK as capable of helping them develop problem-solving skills

3. If French teacher trainees believe that PCK can help to erase possible misconception they have in their subject matter areas.
4. Whether French teacher trainees see PCK as capable of helping them to simulate the use of various methods of passing on knowledge.
5. If French teacher trainees see PCK as capable of developing in them creative thinking.
6. If French teacher trainees see PCK as capable of helping them to improve their attitude to French language, and,
7. Whether French teacher trainees perceive PCK as capable of helping them to increase their self-confidence.

2. Review of Empirical Literature

This work is based on Eysenk and Keane (2008) and Gregory (1990) constructivist theories of perception. Constructivist theories of perception is based on the assumption that perception is an active process, it involves interacting, evaluating, interpreting and organizing sensory stimuli. A person's perception is formed due to the interaction of several factors: such as internal hypotheses, expectations, emotion, motivation and knowledge. Gregory (1990) argues that a subject needs contents and ideas more than a great sum of information and that experience is the main point of interpretation. He also asserts that besides the collection of information, perception involves active participation of higher cognitive functions responsible for constructing and interpreting ideas and that to perceive always mean to integrate feelings into a broader context of an individual's beliefs and opinions.

Williams (2016) defined perception "as our way to recognize and interpret information we gathered through our senses. This also includes how we respond to certain (situations) with the given information" (p1). According to Maingi (2015), teachers' perceptions about what works best in language education include knowledge of subject matter, appropriate instructional methods, and knowledge of the curriculum. A balanced interaction of these three elements provide the teacher with expert teaching knowledge.

Bournot-Trites and Serror (2003) examined French language students' perception regarding their progress in written production in Vancouver single-track immersion school. Fifty-seven of them were asked to compare their compositions in grades 5 and 7 and asked about the differences they observed. They found that, the students noticed many differences in their compositions by grade 7, their language had become more complex and sophisticated, and reflected more elaborate thinking, longer, clearer and more detailed explanation of their ideas and better sentence structure. They also found out that, though the students were young, they were able to perceive that their compositions improved and that their teachers had done a good job. This shows that the teachers had a good knowledge of the different methods and techniques of teaching the students. The study suggests that teachers can do a lot of things to improve more on their teaching if only they understand their students' senses and viewpoint. This they can examined and give both educators and researchers key with which to make better decisions and provide opportunities for learning.

Compared to other subjects, foreign language has a unique and distinguishing characteristics. French for example is a subject taught to students who do not use the language and this makes it a difficult task especially where it is neither the first none the second, but a completely new language to the students. Also, foreign language teaches communication skills and not facts as in content subjects. While all teachers must display knowledge and command of their subject matter, the foreign language teachers particularly the French language teacher must obtain this skill, and also teach it in a way that sustains the interest and motivation among students to acquire the skills.

Almarza in Freeman and Richards (1996) carried out a study on some of the issues that characterized the process of learning to teach a foreign language from the student teachers' perspectives in the University of London. The study focused on how four foreign language student teachers developed their professional knowledge about foreign language teaching and about the types of relationships that exist between knowledge and action with reference to the student teachers' thinking. The method of data collection was through semi-structured interviews, journals, classroom observations and stimulated research procedures. The results show that students'

contributions have become central to understanding the process of learning to teach and that if they are given the chance, they are able to reflect not only on their activities during teaching practice but also on their language learning experiences. Book et al. cited by almarza also observe that helping students think about and check their perspectives about teaching and learning, is essential to educating them in the process of reflection. Only when teachers, educators, understand student-teachers' perception of teaching when they enter teacher training programmes, can they adjust appropriately the course content to overcome any misconceptions that might get in the way of pre-service teachers' learning. These thinking can also be useful in developing the French teacher trainees' pedagogical thinking and skills.

A French teacher therefore must know the different theories and their application to French language teaching. Johnston and Goettsch (2000), in Evens et al. (2016) claim that training in any language is not only the ability to articulate and speak the language but the knowledge of the content and its transcription into PCK. PCK is important when students are learning how to teach a foreign language like French

Evens, Elen and Depaep (2016) reviewed and systematically analyzed seventeen articles in order to find out how PCK is conceptualized and studied in foreign language and second language (FL/L2) education. Their research involved a search in three databases - Eric, Wos, Psychoinfo and a search via the snowball approach. They found out that in the domain of foreign language, PCK is conceptualized as the knowledge of the subject matter, academic content from the students' perspectives, representation of subject matter in appropriate and engaging ways and organizing students for teaching and learning. They also found that teachers' knowledge base of Content Knowledge (CK), PCK interact. And finally, that PCK is influenced by both teachers' experience and teachers' education.

Kathiveeloo, Puteh and Matimatik (2014) investigated primary school teachers' difficulties with fraction. The teachers were given multiple choice questions to determine which answer is right or wrong on the conversion of mixed number into fraction. Some of them who could not get some of the answers right thought about students' reasoning. They found out that this gave the teachers insight about the structure of fraction representation. They also found out that PCK plays an important role in classroom instruction as it involves teachers' competence in delivering the conceptual approach, relational understanding and adaptive reasoning of the subject matter. In this era of globalization, education needs more practical instruction, hence the important skills that a teacher should possess in order to transform the knowledge to be taught to the French teacher trainees in a way that could be easily understood is important. Actual teaching should also include the ability to guide the French teacher trainees to understand meaningfully the content of the subject. Consequently, this study seeks to find out some teacher trainees perception of the importance of PCK in their training.

3. Methodology

The study adopted the descriptive survey design. The population of the study comprise all 415 French undergraduate students in the Department of Educational Foundations and the Department of Foreign Languages, University of Benin, Nigeria, during the 2017/2018 session. Out of this number, a total of 108 French undergraduate students were selected to constitute the sample size. These were selected through a simple random sampling procedure which involved balloting without replacement.

The research instrument was a self-constructed questionnaire, with a four point modified Likert type rating scale. The instrument was validated by three experts, including one from Measurement and Evaluation. The test-retest method was used to determine the reliability of the instrument. This means that, the instrument was administered on the respondents within the target population, but outside the sample at two weeks interval. The Cronbach Alpha statistics was used, a reliability coefficient of 0.75 was obtained. The instrument was considered reliable for data collection. Data was analyzed using Means and Standard Deviation. A criterion mean of 2.50 was used for rejection and acceptance level.

4. Results

The perception of French teacher trainees towards French language pedagogical content knowledge (PCK)

Table 1: Mean Score of respondents on the perception of French Teachers trainees toward PCK in French Language.

Perception of teacher Trainees in PCK	Mean	SD	Decision
PCK develops French Teacher Trainees competences	3.3981	.64038	Agree
PCK helps to guide French teacher trainees in problem solving	3.3519	.78912	Agree
PCK helps French teacher trainees to realize possible misconception and erroneous reasoning	3.1296	.77451	Agree
PCK helps French teacher trainees to simulate the use of various representations, instructions of knowledge net	3.0826	.81501	Agree
PCK helps French teacher trainees to develop creative thinking	3.1759	.87359	Agree
PCK helps French teacher trainees to improve their attitude to French language	3.0278	.88069	Agree
PCK increases self-confidence among French trainees	3.2037	.74582	Agree

4.1 Results and Discussion of findings

Table 1 shows that each of the 7 items had a mean score above 2.50 which means that the teacher-trainees agree that Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) develops French teacher-trainees competence; helps to correct possible misconceptions and erroneous reasoning; helps the use of various representations, instructions of knowledge net; helps in the development of creative thinking, helps in the improvement of attitude and increases self-confidence.

This study corroborates the findings of Kathirveloo, Puteh and Matematik (2014), Evens, Elen and Dpaepe (2016), who found that PCK can develop the competence and disposition that will prepare teacher trainees to be creative and collaborative life –long problem solvers, that teacher trainees with relevant PCK have the capacity to teach with ease because they already know the French methods and instructional materials, to use to teach a particular topic than French teachers without PCK.

The result is also in consonance with Almarza in Freeman and Richards (1996), Bournot-Trites and Séror (2003), and Maingi (20015) who observe that helping students think and check their perspectives about teaching and learning of the language is essential to educating them in the process of reflection, and understanding French language. Teacher trainees perception is important, so that one can know what is needed for improving their learning and teaching practices.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it could be concluded that teacher-trainees conception of Pedagogical Content Knowledge is positive. Based on this, it is recommended that more Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) should be incorporated into undergraduate teacher training curriculum, instead of the one or two courses currently in the curriculum. More causes if designed and implemented, should be able to help the trainees gain adequate content knowledge as well as Pedagogical Content Knowledge to serve effectively as twenty first century French language teachers.

It is also recommended that PCK should be included into the French Language Curriculum in all higher institutions where the Language is learned as it will help those who will end up being teachers to teach the subject effectively.

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