French Language Teachers and the Use of Textbooks as a Communicative Proficiency Tool for Nigerian Junior Secondary School Students

Olaniyi, Adepeju Folasade

Ajibade, Yetunde Adedoyin

Department of Special Education and Curriculum Studies,
Faculty of Education, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife
+234 803 723 3625, yateoau@yahoo.com

Abstract *This study examined French language teachers' use of communicative exercises and activities presented in three purposively selected of the five mostly used recommended French textbooks for Nigerian Junior Secondary Schools to achieve communicative proficiency in their students. The descriptive survey research design was used. The population for the study consisted of Junior Secondary School (JSS) French language teachers and students. The sample comprised 60 randomly selected (JSS) French teachers and their 465 students from 15 junior secondary schools in Lagos State, the most cosmopolitan State in Nigeria. One instrument namely "French Language Teaching Observation Schedule" (FTOS) was used to collect data on teachers' organization of communicative activities, students' participation, methodology and communicative use of the textbooks. Data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics. An average index of 58% was obtained for teachers' communicative use of the activities and exercises contained in the recommended textbooks indicating that teachers were not as competent as required for developing communicative proficiency in their students. The study concluded that the present use of communicative activities and exercises presented in recommended French textbooks for Junior Secondary School students by French teachers could not produce the required and desired level of communicative proficiency in these students.*

Keywords: *french language, secondary school, nigerian students*

1. Introduction

The roles of language cannot be over-emphasized in a dynamic and progressive country like Nigeria where education is considered an instrument 'par excellence' for effecting national development.   More importantly, one cannot talk of globalization, technological breakthrough and economic progress without language, a communicative tool. Language plays a central role in the formation of the political, cultural, economic, professional developments and ethnic identities of the world. It is more than a tool for communication; it forms the basis of intercultural and international relationships. Language gives access to perspectives and viewpoints that might otherwise have remained closed.

The place of language in Nigerian education and the importance of language study in the nation's educational process are recognized and clearly stated as follows in the National Policy on Education (NPE) (FGN, 2004, p. 10):

> *Government appreciates the importance of language as a means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion; and preserving cultures.Thus every child shall learn the language of the immediate environment. Furthermore in the interest of national unity, it is expedient that every child shall be required to learn one of the three Nigerian languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba…For smooth interaction with our neighbours, it is desirable for every Nigerian to speak French. Accordingly, French shall be the second official language in Nigeria and it shall be compulsory in primary and junior secondary schools but a non-vocational elective at the senior secondary school.*

In addition to geographical reasons, there are also reasons in line with global standards responsible for the emphasis placed on French. The importance placed on French, therefore, is not surprising as it is considered a major European language with a long tradition of being a foreign language.

Due to the global importance attached to this language and the emphasis placed on it in Nigeria's NPE, one would expect to see a sizeable group of knowledgeable Nigerians, in French. Unfortunately, the contrary is the case as an average Nigerian cannot even speak French. Communication is the most basic index of language learning. This is

mainly achieved through exposure to communicative activities. Moss & Ross-Fieldman (2003) explain that communicative activities include any activity that encourages and requires a learner to speak with and listen to other learners based on a real need such as to find information, break down barriers, talk about self and learn about culture. Such communicative activities include games, role play, simulation, pair work, information gap activities and other activities that allow interaction amongst learners.

The most accessible institution to develop such skills is the school. In the school, the major role played by the teacher is incontrovertible. Yet, since the introduction of French as a second official language, there does not appear to have been any consideration in respect of the French teacher.

2. Teacher Preparation and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Fundamental to the planning of an effective language education program is needs analysis (Ajibade, 2000). Needs analysis is fundamental to several other aspects of language teaching such as effective textbook preparation and pedagogy. Effectively prepared textbooks need to be used communicatively by adequately prepared teachers. Rao (2002) posits that some teachers are not confident about using CLT pedagogies. There are several ways in which a teacher can prepare for the CLT class. The effective language teacher asks some questions like: Why is the student learning the language? What does he/she need to carry out the tasks to be performed? If a teacher answers these questions correctly, it would assist his/her preparation in the teaching-learning process.

The role of a teacher in CLT includes being a facilitator. It involves facilitating the communication process among all participants in the classroom, and among these participants and the various activities and exercises. The teacher is an independent participant in the teaching and learning group. He/She should be prepared to talk less and listen more. Borg (2006) opines that teachers' characteristics can be defined in terms of personal qualities, pedagogical skills, classroom practices, subject matter and psychological constructs such as knowledge and attitudes. According to Borg, out of several characteristics of a language teacher identified by researchers, the following are the most desirable:

1. Knowledge and command of the target language;
2. Ability to organize, explain and clarify, as well as to arouse and sustain interest and motivation among students;
3. Fairness to students by showing neither favoritism nor prejudice; and
4. Availability to students.

Borg (2006) summarizes some language and language teaching related features which include teacher's characteristics. Hammdou and Bernhardt (1987, p. 302) also submit concerning the foreign language teacher that:

Being a foreign language teacher is in many ways unique within the profession of teaching. Becoming a foreign language teacher, too, is a different process from that which other future teachers experience. This reality is rooted in the subject matter of foreign language itself. In foreign language teaching, the content and the process for learning the content are the same. In other words, in foreign language teaching, the medium is the message.

3. Methodology

The design used for the study was survey. Teachers' and students' observation of the use of activities and exercises for achieving communicative proficiency was done in the course of teaching and data were gathered using the French Language Teaching Observation Schedule (FTOS) which was face-validated by French teaching experts and tested for reliability yielding a co-efficient of 0.69. Three of the recommended French Language textbooks for junior secondary schools in Nigeria were examined. The selected textbooks are:

1. Ajiboye, T., Ogbenege, L. & Ojelade, K., (2002). *Nouvel Horizon.* Ibadan: Bounty Press.
2. Bouacha, A. ,& Paisant, C.,(1991). *Trans Afrique.* Lagos: MacMillan.
3. Mazauric, C., Sirejois, E. , Kim, J. , Makpu, J., & Tijani, M., (2008) *On y va!.* Ibadan: Spectrum Books.

Analysis started with the scoring of relevant items recorded during the observation exercise.
The following were scored on the FTOS:

a. Organization of the communication activities
b. Students' participation
c. Methodology
d. Use of activities

Communication activities in the FTOS were classified as follows:
   a.   Use of no communicative activity – none (0)
   b.   Use of one communicative activity or poorly used communicative activities – poor (1)
   c.   Use of two communicative activities – fair (2)
   d.   Use of three communicative activities – good (3)
   e.   Use of four communicative activities – very good (4)
   f.   Use of five or more communicative activities – excellent (5)

4. Findings

Research Question 1:   What activities and exercises are contained in recommended French textbooks for junior secondary schools?

Table 1 Analysis of Communicative Activities and Exercises in French Language Textbooks

S/N	Communicative Activities	Books				
		Nouvel Horizon	Trans Afrique	On y va	Total	Percentage (%)
1.	Role Play	0	0	3	3/9	33
2.	Simulation	0	1	1	2/9	22
3.	Information gap	1	1	1	3/9	33
4.	Choice in language form	3	3	3	9/9	100
5.	Choice in Language function	3	3	3	9/9	100
6.	Feedback Opportunities	0	0	1	1/9	11
7.	Dialogues	3	1	1	5/9	56
8.	Debate	0	0	0	0/9	0
9.	Communication games	0	1	0	1/9	11
10.	Real life Conversation	1	0	0	0/9	0
11.	Pair work	1	1	3	5/9	56
12.	Communication with peers	1	1	2	4/9	44
13.	Survey	0	0	0	0/9	0
14.	Discussion	2	3	2	7/9	78
15.	Questioning	3	3	3	9/9	100
16.	Small groups	1	1	2	4/9	44
	TOTAL	18	19	25	62	43

Table 1 highlights the variety of activities presented in the three recommended textbooks.

Research Question 2: How do French teachers use communicative activities and exercises in the recommended books to develop proficiency in Junior Secondary School students?

Table 2 Analysis of Teachers' Use of Communicative Activities and Exercises

S/N	Methodology	Books				
		Nouvel Horizon	Trans Afrique	On y va	Total	Percentage (%)
1	Teachers use of activities allows for learning objectives to be measurable	2	2	3	7/15	47
2	Teachers role during activity disturbs learning	3	2	3	8/15	53

3.	Activities target language as the communication tool and expects same from students	3	3	3	9/15	60
4.	Activities focus on future use of the language	2	3	4	9/15	60
5	Activities are well guided and monitored	3	2	2	7/15	47
6.	Activities are achievable within the allowed time	2	2	3	7/15	47
7.	Transitions from activity to activity are clear and orderly	3	4	3	10/15	67
8.	Teacher employs activities that promote learning and critical thinking	2	3	3	8/15	53
9.	Teacher ensures that demonstrations are clearly visible to all students in class	2	2	2	6/15	40
10.	Activities are motivating	3	3	4	10/15	67
11.	Variety of activities are provided	4	5	5	14/15	93
12.	Activity results are concrete	3	3	3	9/15	60
	TOTAL	32	34	38	104	58

From the analysis presented in Table 2, the most striking thing is that teachers use a "variety of activities" as indicated by the highest percentage of 93%. The next highest percentage of 67% indicates that activities used by teachers are methodical and motivating though these activities are considered as "disturbing" at times as reflected in the index of 53%. The fact that activities that promote critical thinking are only fairly used is seen in the average score of 53% assigned to them. Even though activities are seen to be concrete, focused on future use of language as well as targeting communication to some extent as indicated by the index of 60% respectively, the activities are not seen to be well monitored, measurable or achievable as reflected in the poor index of 47%. Worst of all, teachers fail to ensure that all students are carried along as indicated by the index of 40%. The total average score of 58% indicates that teachers are not as competent as required in the use of communication activities and exercises.

Furthermore, during the observation of the teachers' use of recommended textbooks, it was discovered that most of the activities in the textbooks were not judiciously used by the teachers. The teachers were concerned with finishing the syllabus to the detriment of communicative proficiency. Though a variety of activities was used as shown in Table 1, questioning, discussion and reading were the major activities that the teachers focused mostly on which is contrary to the ideas of the proponents of communicative language teaching approach.

According to the proponents of communicative language teaching, it is the duty of the teacher to set up real life situations that will encourage the students to communicate in the target language. Most of the teachers surveyed were only using the textbooks rigidly with little or no innovation that would motivate their students and encourage them to use the target language. Larsen-Freeman (2000) recommends that teachers in a communicative language class should talk less and serve as supervisors to allow satisfactory practice of the target language by the learner which was not so in the schools visited. The teachers operated as the alpha and the omega of the class giving out rules and instruction to the students. Most of the teachers relied on the grammar- translation method especially in schools where *On y va* was used because the book makes use of the target language from the beginning to the end.

Going by Nunan's (1991) five features of "Communicative Language Teaching", a communicative language class should use authentic text in the learning situation which was absent in most of the schools. None of the schools had a language laboratory; teaching was done without the use of audio visuals and cassette. Nunan recommends that efforts should be made to link teaching in the language class with activities outside the classroom. This was not found to be so in the way the teachers used the activities except the text itself recommended outside activities.

Communicative language teaching presumes that learners should be able to express their opinions and ideas but this was not so in the way most of the teachers used the activities. There was an over-reliance on the exercises and examples in the textbooks with little or no room for the learners to express their own ideas and opinions.

The overall aim of language teaching is to create in the learner the capacity to communicate in the target language. Unfortunately, the way activities are used in Nigerian junior secondary schools does not conform to the true nature of communication.

5. Conclusion

It was concluded that the present use of communicative activities and exercises presented in recommended French textbooks for Junior Secondary School students by French teachers could not produce the required and desired level of communicative proficiency in these students.

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APPENDIX

FRENCH LANGUAGE TEACHING OBSERVATION SCHEDULE (FTOS)

Name of School...…………………………………………
No of Students in Class…………………………………..

A	ORGANIZATION OF COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES	0	1	2	3	4	5
1.	Activities are well arranged(from simple to complex)						
2.	Activities build on learners' previous knowledge						
3.	Objectives of activities clear						
4.	There are clear instructions on how activities are to be performed						
5.	Activities occur in a realistic environment						
B	STUDENT PARTICIPATION	0	1	2	3	4	5
1.	Activities give enough room for students' active participation						
2.	Activities allow students to engage in real dialog						
3.	Activities allow students to break up into small groups to practice						
4.	Activities balance the students' theoretical knowledge with practical experience						
5.	Activities allow the use of target language for communication						
6.	There is adequate interaction among the students during activities						
7.	Students play lead roles						
C.	METHODOLOGY	0	1	2	3	4	5
1.	Teacher's use of activities allows for learning objectives to be measurable						
2.	Teacher's role during activities disturbs learning						
3.	Activities target language as a communication tool and expects same from students						

4.	Activities focus on future use of the language						
5.	Activities are well guided and monitored						
6.	Activities are achievable within the allowed time						
7.	Transitions from activity to activity are clear and orderly						
8.	Teacher employs activities that promote learning and critical thinking						
9.	Teacher ensures that demonstrations are clearly visible to all students in class						
10.	Activities are motivating						
11.	A variety of activities are provided						
12.	Activity results are concrete						
D	**USE OF ACTIVITIES**	0	1	2	3	4	5
1.	Activities such as pairing and working in small groups are used						
2.	There is the use of role play						
3.	There is the use of game						
4.	There is the use of discussion						
5.	There is the use of questioning						
6.	Concrete objects are used to facilitate clear understanding						
7.	Audiovisual materials, television and cassettes are used						
8.	Activities allow oral practice of target language						
9.	Activities allow use of new vocabulary						
10.	Activities are ages and level appropriate						
11.	Activities give enough room for practice						
12.	Activities allow the learners to express their ideas and opinions						
13.	Activities are appropriate for teaching communication						