



A Holistic Approach to Language Skills Acquisition: The Case of French as a Foreign Language Teaching and Learning in Nigeria

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Abstract

Most students of French in Nigeria can hardly read or write in the language even after graduation. This is due to lack of adequate instructional materials and poor teaching methodology. Some teachers of French don't teach these skills at all and those who attempt to teach them, lack the methods and techniques; therefore making teaching and learning very boring for the students. The focus of teaching is usually on listening and speaking to the detriment of the other two important skills - reading and writing. To overcome this deficiency and make the French language class effective and interesting, the teacher can adopt the whole language approach. This study examines the application of a holistic approach to language skills acquisition in French as a Foreign Language (FFL) teaching and learning in Nigeria. Despite the importance of French in Nigeria, FFL teaching and learning in the country faces numerous challenges, including inadequate instructional materials, insufficient teachers training, and a lack of emphasis on holistic language skills acquisition. The study aims to address these challenges by exploring the potential of a holistic approach to language skills acquisition in FFL teaching and learning in Nigeria using secondary data. The findings reveal that a holistic approach to language skills acquisition can improve FFL learners' proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. It can also arouse their interest and motivate them to learn. The study recommends the adoption of a holistic approach to language skills acquisition.

Keywords: Holistic approach; Language skills acquisition; French as a Foreign language (FFL); Language Teaching and learning.

1. Introduction

Language plays important role in the life of humans, without language there will be no communication between one another in the society, in the country, and in the world at large. Language is a means of communication through which individuals express their ideas and feeling with each other. In a desire to communicate effectively with her French-speaking neighbor, French as a foreign language teaching and learning was made compulsory in primary and junior secondary schools in Nigeria (FRN, 2014). Language

can be described as the most powerful means of communication and ways of fostering peace for human existence. However to communicate effectively in any given language, one must acquire the skills necessary for communication. This underscores the importance of the concept of whole language approach to language teaching and learning. According to Post (1997:22), "the essence of whole language can be defined as an integration of listening, speaking, reading, writing and thinking within communication-centered learning experiences based on meaningful content". According to

the proponents of the approach, “the focus is on learning language in a way that promotes its ultimate goal: communication. Whole language not only recognizes communication, but it recognizes the holistic nature of the child. Learning holistically is stressed: reading a whole text before analyzing its parts, connecting reading and writing as equal parts of written language, recognizing the necessity of developing oral language in listening and speaking, and using our thinking processes” Post (1997:23).

However in Nigeria, most teachers of French pay more attention on the teaching of oral French while emphasizing less on the other skills. Consequently, many students of French can hardly read and write the language correctly. Furthermore, research has shown that FFL learners in Nigeria often experience difficulties with pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary, which can hinder their ability to communicate effectively in French (Adeniyi, 2011; Ojo, 2012). According to Odey (2002), “for the Nigerian student studying French to be able to write in French, he first reasons sentences in his own native language or the official language (English) and then translates directly into French without realizing that there are some morphosyntactic differences. Words in French are not always arranged the same way as in English...He forgets that both languages have different structures and words function differently.” This form of linguistic interference can be avoided by adopting a holistic approach in language teaching and learning. Renandya *et al* (2024:3) opined that “language is a complicated phenomenon impacted by a dizzying array of ever-evolving factors.” These factors must be carefully addressed to ensure effectiveness in communication.

This study aims to explore the potential of a holistic approach to language skills acquisition in FFL teaching and learning in Nigeria. Specifically, it seeks to

highlight the importance of adopting a holistic approach to French language teaching and learning in Nigeria, to examine how to develop language skills in French through the adoption of a holistic approach, and finally to look at some limitations and strengths of adopting a holistic approach in FFL teaching and learning in Nigeria. It makes some recommendations for educators, stakeholders, and policymakers.

Considering the facts that one only assesses French students by their ability to understand, speak, read and write, those four competence areas should be taught as a matter of necessity holistically. They can be integrated using a variety of materials and activities relating to the student’s own world. Manaf and Mustafa (2022) assert that integrating all the language skills in teaching and learning facilitates the learning of foreign language and promotes the learner’s communication ability. Language learning for communication involves the learning of all the skills: hearing, speaking, reading, and writing. No skill is more important than the other. The teacher of French should start each lesson with the oral aspect before introducing reading and writing. Once they know how to pronounce and understand words, students can read and learn how to write them. All the language skills should be taught together and not in isolation (Rupp, 1989 as cited in Patzelt (1995). The spoken aspect of the language is to be practiced through communicative activities (games, songs, etc.) which help the students to speak a foreign language spontaneously and in a pleasant way. Learning a list of words or grammatical rules is useless and non-motivating. The reading and written aspects of the language have to be taught through authentic documents such as newspapers, pictures, etc. Each lesson should be centered on a speech act that will give the learners the opportunity to use all the languages skills in their daily

activities. Reading and language acquisition should be viewed as holistic processes.

2. Importance of adopting a holistic approach to French language teaching and learning in Nigeria

Learning a language is to acquire tools that will enable the learner to transform a thought into a speech, then into action. To achieve this, the teacher of French should be able to link the four language skills: speech, listening, reading, and writing and integrate them into his lesson. Today, efforts are being put in place to relate different kinds of linguistic learning: the task of writing is being brought closer to the students' experience of reading which, in turn, is being brought into contact with the ability to use spoken language, and oral skills are being supplemented by work on listening comprehension. Students are encouraged to read texts that are meaningful to them. According to Dot and Line Blog (2023, May 11), "In whole language instruction, students engage in authentic reading experiences, such as reading books, poems, and real-world texts. They learn to use various cues, such as context, pictures, and prior knowledge to make sense of the text and develop reading and writing skills holistically." The Blog stressed that "in focusing on reading for meaning and enjoyment, children are more likely to see reading as a pleasurable activity rather than a chore. This can lead to a lifelong love of books and a desire to explore new ideas and perspectives through reading."

To teach effectively and achieve the set objectives, the teacher of French has to be different from the other teachers. He has to be dynamic and creative. He has to make his lesson as communicative as possible. He has to encourage the students to do a great deal of writing and to use invented spelling for words that they weren't sure of spelling. For better results, no skill should be taught as an isolated bit or piece. Following this approach, the teacher would be able to teach the students

all the four language skills-listening, speaking, reading, and writing in the same lesson. A holistic approach to language teaching and learning recognizes the interconnectedness of language skills (Celce-Maurice, 2001; Nation, 2007). According to Dot and Line Blog (2023, May 11), "instruction integrates reading, writing, speaking, and listening, allowing students to develop overall language proficiency. Writing activities such as journaling, creative writing, and responding writing, play a significant role in whole language instruction". Hui (2024) asserts that "with today's technology, language learners can simultaneously read and listen to text through prerecorded oral renditions in the form of audiobooks. Similar text-to-text speech functionalities exist in e-readers and other applications to offer real-time reading-while-listening (RWL) opportunities" The importance of adopting a holistic approach to the teaching and learning of French cannot be overemphasized. It promotes effective language learning and makes learning interesting for students (Nwosu, 2016; Kanu, 2015).

3. Developing language skills in French through the adoption of a holistic approach

According to Post (1997:27), "communication-centered experiences are the heart of language. All aspects of language learning can be integrated into meaningful learning experiences that prepare literate citizens to thrive in today's world". As the teacher of French tries to do this, he should use the most effective methods possible to turn his students into lifelong communicators who have a mastery or and enthusiasm for reading and writing as well as the other skills.

Speech and writing usually complement each other. Spoken language precedes writing and sets the stage for it. There is no sense in the view that one medium of communication is intrinsically "better" than the other. Each language skill is useful in its own way to

communicate effectively as the need arises. The fact that most students of French are deficient in the spoken language constitutes a problem to writing since writing competence cannot be learned isolatedly. It will be possible to acquire some skills in writing only when the students have attained a certain degree of mastery of the other skills.

The acquisition of the writing competence is a more difficult task than the acquisition of the other skills in any language. Wilga (1975) believes that all children learn to speak and express themselves effectively in speech at about the same age even though some, by personality and temperament, may be more articulate than others. But many of them never learn to express themselves freely in writing even with careful instructions. This fact explains why many students of French who try to speak the language cannot communicate in writing. This deficiency could also be attribute to the fact that some teachers of French do not possess the competence required to teach the language holistically. Here are some of the ways to mitigate this deficiency and improve on students' language skills acquisition:

3.1. Communicative language teaching

This method focuses on developing learners' communicative competence through interactive and task-based activities. It emphasizes the use of authentic language materials and task to simulate real-life communication. The teacher should emphasize on teaching language functions, as requesting, apologizing, and complaining rather than just grammar rules. This method of teaching known as the communicative method is against methods that stressed the teaching of grammatical forms and paid little or no attention to the way language is used in everyday life situations.

French language teaching should be made as communicative as possible by focusing on the learner's

knowledge of the functions of language use in specific situations. For this reason, the French teacher while preparing his lesson, should select materials that would present the kind of language the learner would be likely to meet in his daily activities (De Douhet, 2000).

The use of authentic materials, such as news articles, videos, and podcasts, help to provide learners with exposure to real-life language use. However, communicative language learning requires teachers to be trained in the approach and to have the necessary skills and knowledge to implement it effectively.

3.2. Language skill integration

Combining listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in a single lesson promotes a balanced proficiency. This approach views language as a whole, rather than isolated individual skills. It combines multiple language skills in a single lesson or activity. It can be more efficient than teaching individual skills separately, as it allows learners to practice multiple skills simultaneously. To encourage reading, there are two contemporary preoccupations. First, there is a focus on the need to motivate students to read by providing interesting materials and activities. The world of the students' own experience should be represented through the use of familiar social situations, everyday visual language contexts such as road signs, vehicle labels, etc. Secondly, there is an emphasis on training the cognitive skills that students need in order to read effectively. The teacher of French should train the students on segmentation, that is, on the division of the text into segments of significant sentences, and train them also to recognize and follow proper punctuations. The training on the intonation will follow during reading as well as a work on the differentiation of sounds like 'i', 'u', 'ou', etc. He should teach the students to identify where there are consonant licks (les liaisons) and reflect them in their

pronunciation. For example, 'avec une amie' will be pronounced 'a-ve-cu-na-mie' (with a girlfriend).

On the other hand, Writing is used for a wide range of purposes and for a variety of audiences - to express feelings, tell stories, complete forms, keep records, etc. Students have to learn about these purposes, and how the functional differences affect the nature of the language that is used. Different writers have different methods of developing writing abilities in students. According to Redfern (1967), to solve the problem of writing, students should be given frequent exercises of writing. He stresses that students should be made to pay close attention to accent marks written over and under certain letters right from the early stage of learning. Common words in French could be given to the learner without the accents while they are asked to rewrite the words with the proper accents For example,

- Put the correct accents on the following words: Pere, ecole, boite, francais, garcon, fenetre, lecon, gateau, and elephant. The teacher will then ask the students to read aloud the above given words carefully while he makes necessary corrections. It is either some accents have been misplaced on some words, accents have been put on words that shouldn't carry accents, or wrong accents have been put on some words. After instructing the learners to do the exercise, the teacher should check the work and make corrections.
- The teacher may now proceed to give the students a simple text containing these words and ask them to read aloud. For example: Père, école, boîte, français, garçon, fenêtre, leçon, gâteau, éléphant.
- The students may be asked at this stage to identify these words in the text they have just read and write sentences with each of them

using their own words. Repeating such exercises will facilitate the appropriate use of accents by students both orally and in writing. According to Karatas *et al* (2021), "repetition has long been known to enhance learning and retention".

Following this approach, the teacher would have been able to integrate all the language skills in the same lesson helping them to develop overall language proficiency (Dot and Line, 2023).

3.3. Use of authentic materials

Using authentic materials in language teaching involves incorporating real-life materials and resources, such as newspapers, magazines, menus, product labels, etc. into the classroom to provide learners with exposure to authentic language use. They help students develop a more nuanced understanding of language structures, vocabulary, and cultural references. Real-life materials can increase learner motivation and interest, as they are more relevant and relatable. Learning a language is to acquire tools that will enable the learner to transform a thought into a speech, then into action. If the teacher of French desires to see his students use the language correctly both in speech and in writing, he must give them an opportunity to express themselves in function of the different situations that they meet in their everyday life (Oresile, 2000). Teachers should choose material that align with learners' interest and language level.

Authentic materials prepare learners for real-life situations, where they will encounter similar language and cultural references. Teachers should use technology, such as learning management systems and language learning apps, to provide personalized learning experiences tailored to individual learners needs. According to Kern (2024) "Learners now have access to songs, films, current news, podcast, radio broadcasts,

and virtual museum exhibitions in the target language that provide models of language use as well as enjoyment, cultural information, and stimulation of imagination”.

4. Limitations and strengths of adopting a holistic approach in FFL teaching and learning in Nigeria

4.1. Limitations

In spite of the benefits that citizens of Nigeria are to derive in the acquisition of French, there are many obstacles hindering its effective teaching and learning. These obstacles include among others inadequate instructional materials, poor funding, insufficient teacher training, etc. (Afolayan, 2013; Oyebade, 2014). The following are some of the limitations of adopting a holistic French language teaching and learning in Nigeria:

Insufficient resources such as funding, infrastructure, and technology, to support a holistic approach:

One of the major factors affecting the effective teaching and learning of French as a foreign language in Nigeria is insufficient funding. Most institutions where the language is taught are underfunded. As a result, the necessary instructional materials needed to teach the language effectively are not available. The laboratories are under-equipped. There is limited access to internet and uninterrupted power supply. Digital device to support the introduction of technology in teaching and learning are in short supply in most schools.

Inadequate teacher training opportunities:

Achieving French language literacy in Nigeria requires enormous human resources investment. Teachers need to be trained and retrained to keep them updated with the current trends in effective foreign language teaching and learning. Such opportunities are lacking in the Nigerian educational system.

Lack of experienced and qualified teachers: The quality of teachers that handle the teaching and learning of French as a foreign language affects its productivity. Most teachers who teach the language in our schools are not trained teachers therefore lack the expertise to carry out the task effectively especially in private schools. In some public school, qualified French teachers are not giving French language to teach. They are made to teach other subjects like English language, literature, and some other subjects because some Heads of schools have little or no interest in the teaching and learning of French language.

Students’ poor attitude towards the learning of French as a foreign language: According to a research carried out by Anneduke (2009), there is a growing concern about the attitude of Nigerians towards the study of French in our schools. A good number of them are not sufficiently informed about the usefulness of French in our educational system or of its importance as an international language. They feel that people who study French language especially in tertiary institutions are slow learners, or it is a course for dumping students who did not pass their intended course of study. This has led many students to see the study of French language in schools as a waste of time thereby showing little or no interest in acquiring the necessary language skills required for effective communication.

Unavailability of instructional materials to support a holistic language teaching and learning approach:

Adequate instructional materials/equipment can improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the teaching and learning processes. Lack of instructional materials like books, language learning software, computers and language laboratories hampers the teaching and learning of French language as a foreign language in Nigeria. Because of poor funding, teachers cannot afford

multimedia and ICT related material to enrich their teaching.

Teachers' reluctance to embrace change: Due to inadequate opportunities for training and retraining of French language teachers, they find it difficult to move from the traditional methods of teaching they have always known to embrace the new and more efficient methods of teaching making the adoption of a holistic approach to French language teaching and learning difficult. Most of these teachers also lack digital literacy.

4.2. Strengths

The following are some of the strengths of adopting a holistic language teaching and learning approach:

Improved language proficiency: Integrating all the four skills - listening, speaking, reading, and writing in the same lesson instead of teaching them in isolation can improve language proficiency making the students all-round communicators.

Enhanced cultural competence: A holistic approach to language teaching and learning creates cultural awareness thereby helping students to develop skills for effective communication in diverse cultural contexts.

Enhanced learner motivation and engagement: Adopting a holistic approach to French language teaching and learning requires the teacher to select a variety of authentic materials and activities related to the students' own world. This would arouse their interest and motivate them to learn.

Better teacher preparation and support: Adopting a holistic approach to French language teaching and learning would engender teacher training and development which would better equip teachers for effective implementation of the new methods.

Effective use of technology: A holistic approach involve the use of technology, including Internet, language learning software, and online resources. According to Gonzalez-Lloret (2019) as cited in Kern

(2024), "the internet affords engagement with other speakers of the language through social media, discussion forum, virtual exchanges and internships, and online games environments. Such engagements can broaden learners' exposure to socio-pragmatic situations and provide opportunities to develop their L2 pragmatic competence". However, students and teachers will have to be trained on the necessary digital literacy skills for effective use of technology in language teaching and learning.

Context-specific and flexibility: The curriculum designed for the adoption of the holistic approach in language learning would have to be tailored to the educational contexts of Nigeria, adaptable to the students' needs and abilities.

By adopting a holistic approach, FFL teaching and learning in Nigeria can become more effective, engaging, and relevant, ultimately producing proficient and culturally competent learners.

5. Recommendations

Here are some recommendations based on the research:

- i. Educational institutions should provide adequate resources and infrastructure, including language laboratories, libraries, and technology, to support French language teaching and learning.
- ii. Teachers should receive regular training and development opportunities to enhance their language teaching skills and knowledge.
- iii. Teachers should use the most effective methods possible to turn his students into lifelong communicators who have a mastery or and enthusiasm for reading and writing as well as the other skills. Answering questions in an interview conducted by Post (1997), Bartleson says: "Reading things that appeal, writing with real life purposes, and recognizing phonetic patterns as children read, write, and spell is the best way I know to produce literature students."

iv. Teachers of French should plan lessons that not just integrate all the four language skills but which also connect these language arts to course content. Speaking should have a prominent place in the classroom. Students should spend time discussing, reporting and conversing as spoken language foregoes reading and writing. It prepares a platform for them.

v. To encourage writing, teachers should provide a variety of real audiences and functions for his students' work so that students can see that their writing has a genuine purpose. Teachers should use the students' own writing to teach the conventions of language and grammar. Students who hate studying grammar from a workbook may be enthusiastic about revising the grammar and punctuation in their own writing.

vi. Technology, including language learning software, apps, and online resources should be integrated into language teaching to enhance learner engagement and motivation.

vii. Learners should be provided with opportunities for language practice, including language exchanges programmes, conversation clubs, and cultural events.

6. Conclusion

The study has demonstrated the need for a holistic approach to language skills acquisition in French as a foreign language teaching and learning in Nigeria. The findings highlight the importance of integrating language skills, cultural competence, and technology to promote effective language learning. The study recommendations provide a framework for implementing a holistic approach to French as a foreign language teaching and learning in Nigeria. By adopting this approach, educators and policymakers can help address the challenges facing FFL teaching and learning in Nigeria, including inadequate resources, insufficient teacher training, and limited learner motivation.

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