

**THE PROBLEM OF TEACHING COMMUNICATION IN  
FRENCH IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES:  
A FOCUS ON UAT AND IFL-B**

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**Abstract**

*The introduction of the Communication in French course by the Nigerian Universities Commission (NUC) into the Nigerian university system for it to be learnt as a General Studies (GS) course has not come without the peculiar challenges and problems of starting something new. This study is a field report of what were encountered as the major problems and some novel solutions applied to make meaningful progress while teaching the course for two sessions at the University of Africa, Toru-Orua, Bayelsa State and as the Ag. Director of the Institute of Foreign Languages and Biomedical Translations (IFL-BT). The challenges include: the problem of learning a new language, lack of motivation, lack of a language laboratory and textbooks, lack of sufficient lecture periods and lack of sufficient number of teachers to attend to the large classes for effective teaching. The study found out that improvements in the attendance and participation of students can be recorded if French language teachers can motivate the students and remain persistent in the task, instead of losing interest because the students themselves are not showing much interest. Also, the use of call and response system for learning can minimise the absence of the language laboratory and leverage on the short period of time allotted for the course. This study is of the view that if these problems are attended to by the French language teachers and other relevant authorities, a lot of improvements could be recorded in the teaching and learning of the course in Nigerian universities.*

**Keywords:** *Teaching, Communication in French, UAT, IFL-BT, Nigerian Universities, Motivation.*

**Introduction**

This paper is a field report of the challenges and problems experienced teaching the communication in French course at the University of Africa, Toru-Orua, Bayelsa State and observing the language lecturers as the Ag. Director of the Institute of Foreign Languages and Biomedical Translations (IFL-BT) at the Bayelsa Medical University. In the last few years the teaching of French has been added to the list of GST Courses by the Nigerian Universities Commission. The fact that the French language is essential to Nigerians as Nigeria is surrounded by French speaking countries and the fact that French is an important language to the business world must have been important in arriving at the decision. According to an article written by the Startupr Hong Kong, French is the official language of over 29 countries of the world, and it is the second-most widely spoken first language in the European Union. So, if a Nigerian student is to travel to European countries upon graduation, French is the second language needed after the English language and in some cases, the only language needed (cf.

Idegbekwe & Teilanyo, 2019). Also, the colonial history of France has helped spread the language in the modern world in the same way as English. This has led to a situation in which there are more non-native French speakers than native speakers. So, there is a justification for the course as a GST course.

In accordance with the NUC Benchmark framework, the course Communication in French is taught at the University of Africa (UAT) as a two semester compulsory course for all first year students. UAT is not alone in embracing the teaching of the French course in Nigeria as other universities such as (as listed by Ezeodili & Ezeafulukwe, 2016, p.3) Imo State University, (IMSU) Owerri, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam, Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike, Federal University Ndufu-Alukwu, Ebonyi State (FUNAI) Abakaliki and other private universities in the country. The Institute of Foreign Languages and Biomedical Translations (IFL-BT) offers foreign languages such as French, Spanish, Russian, Chinese-mandarin, German, Portuguese and English as a second language. Being a new course as it were both to the students and the lecturers, there are bound to be teething problems which are discussed here.

This is not the first study in this area. Teibowei (2017) carried out a study on the problems of teaching and learning French grammar in Bayelsa State. The study revealed that unqualified French language teachers, lack of retraining exercises for teachers, lack of standard textbooks and poor remuneration affect the teachers in teaching of the French grammar. Also, learning of the French grammar is hindered because the rules are too many and confusing, the students lack good role models in the teachers, there is no motivation on the part of the students and there are no standard textbooks to consult for further insights. The study focused on the entire state with emphasis on the teaching of grammar.

Omoniyi (2012) focused on the socio-politico and pedagogical problems of language teaching in Nigeria. The study devoted a section of the study of the French language and the Arabic language in Nigeria as foreign languages as a status. According to Omoniyi (2012, p. 35),

Although French and Arabic are elective subjects in the Secondary School Curriculum at both Junior and Senior levels. The Government is hardly aware of the problems that are likely to affect the teaching of both languages in the nation's schools, knowing that they are foreign languages for which pupils will not readily find models to interact with on a daily basis. However, the nation has now established two Special Language Villages, one for Arabic in the north-east of the country, and another for French in the South-west, where students can, over periods ranging from six months to one whole year, experience full immersion in those two languages. This approach to the teaching of French and Arabic, has the unexpected benefit of pointing at or highlighting what would appear to be a fundamental fallacy in the teaching of English based on the assumption that the language is a second rather than a foreign language in Nigeria.

He goes further to note in the study that as long as this assumption continues to hold sway, with the result of proficiency attained in it by teachers and necessarily by their pupils also, will persist in the nation's school system, and this will continue to pose a big problem to the nation's educational planners.

Oyebole (2014) focused on some of the ordeals involved in learning a Foreign Language in Nigeria with a focus on the French Language. Using the sociological approach to language study, Oyebola's (2014) study is of the opinion that the biggest problem facing the teaching of the French language in Nigeria is the lack seriousness of the Nigerian government to adopt the French language as an official language side by side the English language as has been advocated by UNESCO and corroborated by the generous efforts of the French government in adopting some secondary schools and other programmes aimed at promoting the French language. At the end, Oyebola suggests that for a language as complex as French, learners at all levels should be encouraged and motivated to learn the language in a conducive environment. Also, the Nigerian government should do all things possible to give the importance of learning the language adequate and wide publicity. The Nigerian government should endeavour to subsidize French books and teaching materials; and make them available and accessible to learners of the language. It is also of necessity to equip language laboratories with various modern technological gadgets in order to aid learners' knowledge of how to pronounce the French sounds correctly.

Also, Ogunbiyi (2012) focused on the problems associated with implementing the French language curriculum in Secondary Schools in Lagos state, Nigeria. The study identified shortage of qualified language teachers, inadequate teaching aids, lack of relevant text books, the problems of multi-lingualism, Lack of well-equipped language laboratories and libraries, lack of interest on the part of the students and lack of motivation for both students and teachers alike as the major problems preventing the full scale implementation of the French curriculum in the state. At the end, the study concludes that: 'It is very important that Nigeria should study French language for international mutual understanding and cooperation. It is also essential for socio-economic and technological development of both Anglophone and the Francophone neighbours. Re-training of French teachers through in-service programmes would be necessary for the effective implementation of the curriculum. French language educationists should be invited to prepare textbooks for the students' integration of their learning experiences and their everyday activities' (Ogunbiyi, 2012, p. 4).

The introduction of the Communication in French course by the NUC is a relatively new exercise. Attention of researchers has not been focused on the challenges that came with it. Perhaps, they have been busy in their own universities too trying to overcome. Hence, there is a need to present the challenges here and the humble and novel ways in which the challenges were resolved or managed as the case may be.

#### **Learning a new language altogether**

If there is any problem faced at the beginning of the teaching period, it is the fact that the lecturer needs to convince the students that they are learning a new language. This usually comes with an initial protest from some of the students especially students studying courses not related to language or art based courses. The protest usually comes from the science and social science students. Learning a new foreign language could be taxing for an undergraduate who has always been taught the English language as the only foreign language and medium of expression in a formal environment. According to Comben (2016) it takes a lot of guts, curiosity, time and effort to learn a language as an adult. In the opinion of Carl (2019), learning a foreign language is one of the hardest things a brain can do. What makes a foreign language so difficult to learn is the effort the learner has to make to transfer between linguistically complex structures.

Due to the above, the first sets of classes for all the students in the various departments are usually slow or having a slow start. This is because the basis of the French language is focused on for few weeks and laced with motivational speeches on why the subject should be learnt. For most persons, beginning a thing is usually difficult especially beginning from the very beginning. Almost every language learning journey starts with the alphabet, which can be difficult for some people. However, after the first part of learning alphabets, then proceeding to learn greetings; the students' interest increases. In as much as starting is a challenge especially with the alphabet, there comes another one, such as greetings and everyday phrases in French. It has been observed that the interest of the students pick up at this point as shown in three evaluation areas which are represented in the table below using data from the science group:

**Table 1: Showing the improvements after the first few weeks of teaching GST French**

	<b>While learning Alphabet and Numbers</b>	<b>While learning greetings and common phrases</b>
Average Class Attendance	42	79
Class Concentration	Low	High
Participation in class Activities	11/42	73/79
Submission of Assignments	19/42	67/79

*Source: the present study*

The three areas used as evaluation are arbitrary. However, it represents vividly the improvement made from overcoming the setbacks of the early beginning of learning the French language which is a new language to the students. It is also observed that many of them did not learn French in either the primary or secondary school days. Their systems of communication on a large scale have been the use of English for formal speech events and the use of their various indigenous language for informal. This could go a long way in justifying the reasons why the alphabets of the new language seemed difficult. The low attendance to classes at the beginning could be for different reasons apart from the fact that they do not like the lectures. It could be that they do not enjoy the lectures and they stayed back; it could also be that as first year students, they do not understand fully how the university operates with the GST courses. However, it is observed that with the introduction of greetings, the number of students in class almost doubles and the students are kind of excited of learning new ways of greeting in another language which many of them said they have heard in movies or songs. They made fun out of it and the interest to learn new ones could be observed.

There is the observed quickness to speak amongst the students at this stage especially when asked to repeat a greeting or a common expression in the language. This is very much different with the level of attentiveness at the beginning. What this means is that the motivational talks on the importance of learning such a language and the persistence on the part of the teacher not to give up could go a long way in helping the students gain interest with time and that there is a need to spice up classes with what students can enjoy and find joy in.

### **Lack of motivation attitude**

Though it was stated earlier that the researcher needed to present series of talks on why the students need to learn French at the university level, it was observed that on a regular basis a negative shift in the kind of progress recorded in the table above. The usual feedback from them can be summarised as the course being an avenue for the university to stress them as nothing can be gained. One of the main obstacles in learning a foreign language is attitude. According to Okoh (2013), the attitude of the language learner determines the altitude of the output. If one believes that the language is difficult and that, even if one works hard at it, one might not succeed; then one's brain will not try enough. Most students say the French language is very difficult and complicated and full of rules and conjugation. In my assessment, this attitude has a way of affecting them as it reduces their efforts and learning and trying to achieve new things.

Again, this is followed this up with more inspirational talks. The main idea here to the solution is to direct or influence the students to think positive, have a positive attitude. It should not be misunderstood, no one is saying that it is easy, but they should try to always keep in mind that if they are persistent enough, there will be nothing they cannot achieve or do, same goes with language learning. The people speaking the language as a foreign language, how did they do it?' Are they aliens? Of course not; they try hard, they have a positive thinking, and they aren't afraid to give it a try.' When such a statement is put up, most students usually calm down and make attempts and various times to either pronounce the word or present the right verb conjugation task or any other task as the case maybe. The truth is it is not entirely true that learning a foreign language is tricky. It is a way of thinking, and above all, it is an attitude.

### **Lack of language laboratory and learning textbooks**

This is the challenge that has not been fully solved as the dynamics are not in hands of the researcher in many ways. The problem of having a good textbook or reading material for the course was partly solved as books that are readily available to the students were sourced out using books that are accessible in most bookshops in the state where UAT is located. However, it is disappointing that only few students bought them. The issue of textbooks may not be associated with French alone other teachers also complain of students not buying textbooks relevant for the various courses. According to the UNESCO report for African countries for the year 2017, in many countries students at all levels either lack books altogether or are required to share them extensively with others. Without textbooks, students can spend many of their school hours copying content from the board, which severely reduces time for engaged learning. The report went on to state that the cost of textbooks is a key barrier that prevents students at all levels from having unhindered access to the learning materials they need. Also, it is noted in the report that although systematic data are lacking, and generally exist only for core textbooks, existing information shows that in many countries, students at all levels either lack textbooks altogether or are required to share them with their peers. This is not different from my experience teaching the communication in French course at UAT. Students waste more time following my dictation methods of note taking as there are no reference materials to fall back on.

The second problem is the lack of a language laboratory in UAT and in most Nigerian

universities. The IFL-BT has also not gotten a language Laboratory. Lecturers have to improvise with practical lessons on You Tube and Whatsapp. Even when they exist, their capacity either in the number of students the laboratory can take or the existing infrastructure is usually very limited. The case becomes futile when language based departments in the university do not have a standard language laboratory then one makes a case for a GST French course laboratory. According to Alufohai and Aziegbe (2016, p.56), the language laboratory gives every learner the freedom to learn at their own speed and it does not require the teacher to be present every time. Using the lab, the teachers can render assistance to the students individually or collectively. The language laboratory is a very helping tool for practicing and assessing one's speech in a language. Language laboratory is used in learning pronunciation and all other aspect of the phonetics of a language. How important a language laboratory is cannot be overstressed in the area of learning for the purposes of communication. The language laboratory, exist to help one use technology effectively to communicate. It is usually recommended in language teaching for a learner to hear the best samples of all spoken language in order to get the best sensibilities in the course of learning. This declaration is validated by David-Wilson and Thayalan (2007) who opined that language laboratory is required by any language learner to have a good command of the language for communication purposes, with clarity and accuracy being vital for effective and efficient communication.

Language laboratory among other facilities is very important in the effective implementation of the French language curriculum in Nigeria (cf. Adebayo 2007). This view was further stressed by Mambo (2004) who described the language laboratory as one of the foundation of language instruction. Thus, language laboratory is seen as an important instructional tool for language teaching. A language laboratory is an environment designed to enhance foreign language learners' skills. It is generally equipped with analogue and digital hardware and software (tape recorders, video cassette recorders and computers). Language laboratory provides practice in listening comprehension speaking (listening and repeat), with the goal of reinforcing the grammar, vocabulary and function (grammatical structures) presented in class. The language laboratory is an audio or audio visual installation used as an aid in modern language teaching.

As important as the instructional material is, it is not readily available for use. However, in order not to miss out completely in the area of sounds and pronunciation in the course of learning, the call and response system was introduced. This is possible when the class is calm and words are pronounced loudly, the students also do the same in response while the teacher listens to hear variations. If the teacher is not satisfied, he/she moves round and asks individuals to pronounce it. The problem with this is that if the teacher makes a mistake in the pronunciation, it is also learnt in that manner.

#### **Insufficient number of lecturers and lecture hours**

Using the information of the NUC Benchmark, 2016, the Communication in French course is a two unit course which means by the university system of time allocation, the course is allotted two hours of lecture periods in a week. This is grossly inadequate if a new language is to be learnt. One can argue that the Communication in English course taught side by side is also given two hours; however English is a language most students are conversant with already before gaining admission into the university. The same cannot be said of the French language. With the two hours class a week, even the language laboratory might not be too useful to the students as there is not period for practical except it is divide into an hour each; this too has its

consequences and the time for theory lessons is greatly reduced. It is really difficult finding enough time to learn a new language like French. However, taking a trip to or living in the country where French is used would not be a bad idea either through excursions or field trips. French speaking countries are Nigeria's neighbours; getting there with students may be possible with careful planning.

Related to the insufficiency in the lecture hours is the problem of insufficient teachers. For the period which this report covers, the researcher taught the course alone to entire university first year students numbering over 1,500 with carry over students especially in the second year. This is achieved by dividing the students into three groups using related faculties and departments; Faculties of Arts and Education, Social and Management Sciences and Basic and Applied Sciences. . Each group learns for two hours maximum a week. This could be made better if each group is at least assigned to one teacher in order to ensure smooth operations in the marking of assignments monitoring the development of the students.

### Conclusion

The study presents that improvements in the attendance and participation of students can be recorded if French language teachers can motivate the students and remain persistent in the task instead of losing interest because the students themselves are not showing much interest. Also, the use of call and response system for learning can minimise the absence of the language laboratory in the course of teaching. The present study highlighted the problems of teaching the Communication in French course at the University of Africa, Toru-Orua, Bayelsa State. The study presented the challenges to include: the problem of learning a new language, lack of motivation, the lack of a language laboratory and textbooks and the lack of sufficient lecture periods and the lack of sufficient number of teachers to attend to the large classes for effective teaching to be done. This study is of the view that if these problems are attended to by the French language teachers and other relevant authorities, a lot of improvements could be recorded in the teaching and learning of the course in Nigerian universities.

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