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French Teaching in Early Childhood Education for Sustainable Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

The teaching and learning of French in Nigeria has a lot of prospects as the ability to communicate in several languages opens doors for great opportunities. However, French is scarcely taught in the nursery schools. Most people who study French come in contact with it partially in the secondary schools or in preliminary studies at tertiary institutions. This attests to the fact that many of our French graduates can hardly communicate fluently in the language due to the limited period of their training and the fact that learning a language as an adult is an uphill task. This paper focuses on the place and importance of French teaching and learning in Nigeria, especially at the level of early childhood education. It highlights the methods of teaching the language at this early stage and the role of French language in enhancing sustainable development in Nigeria. Research findings in the domains of French language studies as well as in early childhood studies and others, will help to support the fact that French language teaching in early childhood education is a necessary instrument, capable of bringing about sustainable development in Nigeria.

Keywords: French Language, Early Childhood Education, Teaching and Learning, Sustainable Development, Nigeria.

Introduction

Language is an indispensable means by which human life and its activities are connected. Language is what makes man a higher animal because man is able to communicate to one another through the use of words and signs. This communication could be verbal or non-verbal. According to John Oates in Ichado [2015:122], "La capacité de s'exprimer dans une langue est une des connaissances les plus impressionnantes qu'on peut acquérir au cours de sa vie". "The ability to express or communicate in a language is one of the greatest knowledge one can acquire in life". (Notre traduction). French as a foreign language in Nigeria according to Ichado (2015:122) "est une clé qui nous ouvre le monde étranger" this means that it is a key which opens the door to the foreign world, therefore its teaching and learning should be given proper and serious attention in Nigeria.

More so, Nigeria is a country that is surrounded by French speaking countries namely; Republic of Bénin, Chad, Cameroun and Niger, hence Nigerians need to learn French in order to interact effectively with their neighbours and the francophone world. Faniran (2016) posited that, with the knowledge of French, Nigerians and their counterparts in French speaking countries will be able to work together in the areas of science and technology especially now that the world is a global village due to the existence of modern technology.

This paper explains the need to create a rich pre-school learning environment which would give room to improve French language usage and maintenance especially in this era of globalization.

Definition of Concepts

Early Childhood Education: According to Wikipedia, Early Childhood Education is a branch of education theory which relates to the teaching of young children (formally or informally) until the age of eight. Infant/ toddler education, a subset of early childhood education, denotes the education of children from birth to age two. Early childhood education consists of activities and/or experiences that are intended to effect developmental changes in children prior to their entry into elementary school. According to Mishra (2007), Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) refers to a wide range of programmes, that are aimed at the physical, cognitive and social development of children before they enter primary school – theoretically from birth to about age 7 or 8.

Early childhood care and education comprises all the essential supports a young child needs to survive and thrive in life, as well as the supports a family and community need to promote children's healthy development. This includes nutrition, health, intellectual stimulation, providing opportunities for active learning as well as social and emotional care; and also nurturing to meet a child's needs to develop his/her human potential in order to help the child play active role in his/her family and later in life in the community. The strength of quality in ECCE programmes is their emphasis on developing children's understanding of their world, building confidence in them, helping them to develop good communication skills and flexibility which they need to interact effectively with that world. This means dealing with real life changes which enables them to be able to obtain their rights and be active and contributing members of the society.

Sustainable Development

According to Gagnier D in Obieze (2011:474), Sustainable development is the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs. This development can be looked at in three perspectives namely, economic, social and political development. However, if French language is introduced early in children education, it will enhance their level of communication also in other languages and in the knowledge of their culture; this will help them in future to function effectively in any area of life and wherever they find themselves; in order words contributing to sustainable development in their families, communities, and in the society at large.

Theoretical framework

The inclusion of French Language in early childhood education is known to be one of the contributory factors in sustainable development by way of promoting cultural diversities, encouraging lifelong learning, enhancing cognitive development and language skills, supporting inclusive and equitable education for all, which aligns with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4. However, according to UNESCO (2024) *“UNESCO regards ECCE as a fundamental and intergral part of education system and a solid foundation on which to build lifelong education, lives and careers. All of its work in this area aligned with target 4.2 of Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to “By 2030 that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they can be ready for primary education”.*

Teaching French language in early childhood education facilitates the development of cognitive, emotional and social skills that are useful for global citizenship and cultural diversity. This in turn will enhance sustainable growth. This assertion agrees with the findings of Merrit (2013) and Ursula & Ersan (2020) in Tijani & Babalale (2022:203) that bilingualism have a positive effect on the brain when acquired at an early age as the ability to move from one language to another helps them in terms of recognition, interpretation and language proficiency.

In addition to this, Krasher (1982), in his language acquisition theory, affirmed that early exposure to language learning, will increase the child's language acquisition, increase proficiency and motivation. He went further to state that language immersion programmes which involves acculturation and authentic materials will promote learning and understanding of the said language. This is in line with the study of Tijani & Babalale (2022 : 204) which posited that Nigerian learners should use authentic materials such as charts, pictures, audio and video pedagogical aids which can sustain the children's interest and motivation in the language.

The Place of French in Nigeria

In the countries that are colonized by Britain, English has remained their official language and a language of education, Amadi (2023). In the same vein, Obi (2021) in Amadi (2023) posited that in today's language of the world, English has gained massive popularity.

French language cannot be relegated to the background or be treated with an air of casual flings because of its numerous significance to Nigeria, though it has experienced a kind of snail development. The emergence of French language as a school subject in Nigeria started in the 17th century. Brann in Amadi (2015) stated that French was first introduced in St. Anne's School Lagos, in the year 1891.

More so, according to <http://www.diplomate.gouv.fr>, there are currently over 220, million French speakers worldwide, including 72 million so called partial French speakers. In Africa as a continent, French is spoken in over 20 countries, <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/>. They are as follows: Algeria, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Benin, Democratic Republic of Congo, Congo Kinshasha, Côte d'Ivoire, Burundi, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Rwanda, Senegal, Seychelles, Togo, Tunisia etc. From the list above, it is evident that Nigeria as an African country is surrounded by French speaking countries. Due to the benefits from the relationship with these countries, the Abacha administration in 1996 at Ouagadougou declared French language the second official language in Nigeria. Many countries today like Nigeria, having seen the importance of French language, have adopted it as their second official language, and language of administration and commerce. Hence, the Nigerian National Policy on Education (2004:10) encourages the learning of French as a foreign and second official language in Nigeria. It therefore states the importance of language as follows:

- *Government appreciates the importance of language as means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion, and preserving cultures. Thus, every child should learn the language of the immediate environment, and one of the three Nigerian languages for national unity.*
- *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 and Non-vocational elective at the senior secondary school.*

French Language in Early Childhood Education for Sustainable Development:

Nigeria as a multilingual nation is known to have English language as its lingua franca, and the languages of the three major ethnic groups, thus: Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa, also has French as the second international language. Apart from these major languages, there are over 400 indigenous languages (Ikoro 2019) that are spoken in various part of the country which also promote multilingualism.

Language Education can be viewed as a basic tool for sustainable development, productivity and national integration. It can also be referred to as a veritable catalyst for producing quality human resources required for productivity and development. The Nigerian National Policy on Education (2004:10), emphasizes the great role of language education as it emphatically states that "*Government appreciates the importance of language as a means of promoting social interacting and national cohesion and also preserving cultures*" while the policy states that French language as a second official language in Nigeria will ensure smooth interactions with its neighbours. This will in no doubt promote sustainable development. However, if French language is introduced early in the education of a child, it will not only widen the horizon of the child's learning but also impact positively on the child to speak other languages fluently; and if a child has the ability to speak multiple languages, he/she stands a better chance of securing employment in the labour market in future and thereby contributing to sustainable development in the society. In agreement with this assertion Ajose, Akanmu, Goodnames (2024), in their study on the Impact of Early French Language Education on Multilingual Proficiency in Nigeria: Cognitive, Cultural, and Implementation Challenges reveals that multilingual French language learners exhibit better multilingual competence, cognitive flexibility and cross linguistics interaction. This goes further to buttress the fact that, if a child learns a language in a multilingual environment, there is a tendency that the child will learn faster than a counterpart that is learning a language in a monolingual environment.

In addition, for the purpose of early childhood education, the Nigerian National Policy on Education [2004:11] goes further to state that the pre-primary education should include inculcation of social norms in the child, inculcation in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, the

environment, art, music, and playing with toys etc. It also includes developing a sense of co-operation and team spirit and teaching the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes and many others through play. It is obvious that during early childhood education, while teaching French language, all these goals would be met.

Methods of Teaching French to Pre-School Children

The various methods chosen for the teaching of these pre-school children should be mostly visual as many of them want to see and participate in the learning processes. Hence any method used should be more of practical works which include drawing and conversation, songs, poems, rhymes and physical participation in all of them. Blanka (2012) encourages the use Total Physical Response [TPR] method because one remembers.

“10% of what one has read,
20% of what is heard,
30% of what is seen
50% of what is heard and seen
70% of what is said
90% of what is done ”

In this method, children are engaged in active participation in the subject matter as regards learning activities. Their lessons should revolve round basic things they should know, like greetings, members of the family, introducing themselves and others, numbers, letters of the alphabet, colours, shapes, sizes of objects, days of week, months of the year, animals in the home and bush, names of parts of the body, names of objects in the home and school, the names of the food we eat and the things we drink, fruits and vegetables, the clothes we wear, weather and seasons in Nigeria.

The above topics can be taught using the TPR method.

The letters of the alphabet could be taught using the **ABCD** song in French which is very easy for the children to learn; while numbers **1 to 10** can be taught using the *one two three* song in French language. Thus:

Un- deux- trois- quatre - cinq- six- sept, huit- neuf- dix.
Greetings in French could be taught in song form.
Bonjour, Bonsoir, Bonne nuit
Comment ça va ? Ca va bien merci. Au revoir.

The teacher should use the role play method or play way method with lots of repetition drills so that they can master them. While teaching parts of the body, in order to master the right pronunciations the teacher can use a song relating to the parts of the body and as they are singing, they touch the parts and mention the names of these parts in French for example,

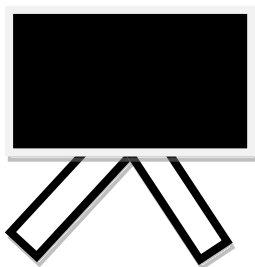
Ma tête, mes épaules, mes genoux, mes pieds, (3x)
Appartiennent à Jésus.

Method of practical works:

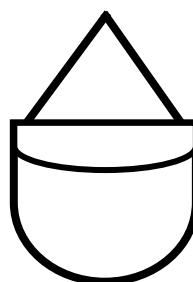
This is a method whereby a teacher gives the children plasticine or other items to cut out various shapes of objects. Another instance could be where a teacher makes the children to do counting of numbers in French with bottle corks.

In teaching colours for example after telling them names of the various colours, the teacher can allow the children to identify various objects in the class and mention the names of the objects and their colours. For example, objects like their school bags, food flask, water bottle, school uniforms, shoes, and Nigerian flag.

They can draw them and colour them and write the names of the colours in French



Le tableau est noir



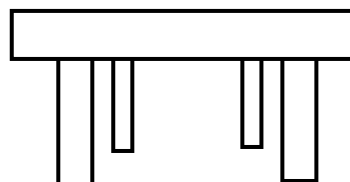
Mon sac est blanc

In teaching objects found in the classroom in French language, the teacher tells then the names of the objects like *Voici un sac (This is a bag)* after showing them the bag, he continues to pronounce it while the pupils repeat it several times. At a certain stage both the question of the teacher and the repetition of the children become so melodious.

For example: *Voici une table.*

Qu'est-ce que c'est ? C'est une table

Répétez ? C'est une table.



The Use of Songs and Rhymes in Teaching Pre- School Children

The place of songs in teaching pre- school children French language cannot be over emphasized since French is a musical and a romantic language. Children love music and they love to sing and dance. They learn by singing songs or reciting rhymes. Virtually all the topics listed above which form the content of what they should know in French at this level can be taught in song form because most of the new vocabularies learnt by the children through songs are not easily forgotten. It is not compulsory that there must be an existing song or poem related to the topic; the teacher can create them during his/her preparation for the lesson. This is where the creativity and the intelligence of the teacher come into focus. Such songs like:

*Bonjour lundi
Comment ça va mardi ?
Ça va bien mercredi
Je viens de la part de jeudi
Pour dire à vendredi
Qu'il appelle samedi
Pour aller à l'église dimanche*

John, Bulus, Adekanye & Alexis (2012 :29)

The above song could be used to teach greetings and days of the week in French language. The seven days in a week are mentioned in the song in order.

At this level of pre-school education more emphasis should be placed on the oral aspect or spoken French because of the inability of children to write at this stage. Their brains are quick and sharp to retain new words and new things. Through these songs and rhymes they also master the correct pronunciations of words in an informal manner. With the advent of information and communication technology, many of these songs and rhymes are in video clips which can easily be played for the children during lessons thereby making the lesson more lively and down to earth as they could see the real objects talked about in the video.

Method of drawing and conversation:

This method involves drawing, colouring and mentioning the names of objects. For instance, they can be asked to draw some objects in the class like pencils, chair, table, bag etc and colour them with different colours and also make sentences with them.

Example : Chinwe a une jupe. La jupe de Chinwe est noire.
Chinwe has a skirt. Chinwe's skirt is black in colour.

**Cartoon**

Some of these topics can also be taught in cartoon forms. According to the dictionary definition on internet,(google) "Cartoon is simple drawing showing the features of its subjects in a humourously exaggerated way, especially a satirical one in a newspaper or magazine." MukhlezurHussain. (2022,). Define "It is also a film using animation techniques to photograph a sequence of drawing rather than real people or objects." For example schroumpf programme in French is a cartoon greatly loved by children; which could also be used to teach them during a class lesson.

Communicative Games

This could be used to teach the children and also to test their competence in the language. Such games could be for example: Guess who? Or Guess what? In this game the teacher hides the object and allows them to guess until they mention the right thing. This game helps to build up their vocabulary."L'enseignant a l'école primaire ... doit noter que le jeu fait partie de la nature de l'enfant" "The teacher in the primary school should note that play is an integral part of the nature of the child" (Notre traduction) Ogunyioriofo (2006) in Ichado (2015;129). These games should be instructive and educative.

Audio-visual method:

This method involves listening and watching at the same time what the teacher intends to teach the pupils. This method is very important because children like to see pictures of what they are being taught and this helps them to retain in their memory what they have seen and heard.

Other methods of teaching these pre-school children could be through films, drawing, flash cards, picture books and picture dictionaries. The French teacher should make sure that the children are actively involved in any method he chooses to use for them.

Conclusion

Teaching and learning of French in early childhood education is indispensable considering the fact that it is the bedrock of all the other stages of learning the language. Considering the vital position French language occupies in Nigeria and in the world at large in contributing to sustainable development in all aspects of life, efforts should be made to develop and nurture the growth of the language so that right from the child's formative years, he is introduced to the language, French culture and civilization through effective teaching methods such as songs, rhymes, cartoons just to name but a few, (as has already been mentioned in this paper) that can create lasting impact on the child and help him to adapt well in the secondary school and integrate well in the society in which he belongs. This will help to bring about sustainable development.

Suggestions and Recommendations

- French teachers should cultivate the habit of communicating to the children in French so that they can get acquainted with the structure of the language.
- They should teach them with modern ICT resources like television set, radio, tape recorder, audio-visual materials and projectors.

- They should be taught how to effectively speak and write the French language and be given the necessary attention they need by parents and teachers.
- Both the Nigerian government and French government should be involved in motivating them by supplying teaching resources and books that suit their ages.
- French should be included as a subject in pre-primary school curriculum and also included in the school time table.
- French should not be paired with other languages or subjects in the school curriculum since the *Nigerian National Policy on Education* states that it is compulsory as a second official language.
- There should be training and retraining of French teachers here in Nigeria and in France so that they can be continually abreast of modern methods of teaching the language, paying heed to international approved standard.

Contributions to Knowledge

- This study will in various ways contribute to existing knowledge by directing educators, curriculum implementers or education policy makers and learners on application of sustainable development theory to French language teaching in early childhood education.
- French language education in early childhood, will promote the usage of practical strategies in teaching the pupils.
- This work will enhance cultural awareness and understanding among the learners.
- Moreso, this study will go a long way in empowering the pupils to participate actively in both national and international educational programmes that will foster sustainable development.
- This study, in the aspect of language education policy in early childhood education, will help to put in place a standard language policy that will be relevant to all learners.
- Finally, this research will aid in encouraging multilingualism in the nation.

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