

RESOURCEFULNESS AND MATERIAL UTILISATION FOR THE TEACHING OF FRENCH

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Abstract

The paper examines the French Language teaching context in Nigeria and focuses on the problem of lack of instructional materials. It directs attention to the concept of resourcefulness and discusses how the principles of resourcefulness can be utilized to find solutions (his problem).

Introduction

Language deals with the communication of meaning and success in the foreign language classroom reflects the extent to which the teacher employs strategies which encourage active] communication among learners. Success in foreign language teaching is not merely the coverage of the prescribed textbook. It consists in what the learners are able to do with the language. Material-rich I classrooms constitute an appropriate context for teachers to make the foreign language experience both relevant and exciting to students. Teacher resourcefulness is an important factor in the creation of a conducive environment for foreign language teaching. *The World Book Dictionary* (1996) defines 'resourcefulness' as being good at thinking of ways to do things. In this paper, it relates to the teacher's ability to device low cost materials that work in contexts where materials are lacking.

One of the greatest problems in the teaching of French in Nigerian secondary schools is the tendency of the vast majority of students to drop the subject as soon as they are permitted to do so. Writing on a similar experience in the teaching of French in Scotland, Clark (1987:128) states that "what was especially distressing to foreign language teachers ... was the fact that the decline seemed to be among the more able pupils". The decline in enrolment in French classes is not surprising. With Government emphasis on the study of science today, many students tend to believe that the learning of French is not of relevance to their future career, which is clearly a short-sighted view of what a knowledge of French is meant to achieve in Nigeria. To reverse this trend, the teacher should give adequate information to students about the need for French among Nigerians in practically all professions, given the vast extension of areas of cooperation among Anglophone and Francophone countries in the West African region, and indeed, with the transition from the Organization of African Unity to the African Union, in the whole of the African continent. But adequate information alone will not suffice to retain learners in the French programme. Teachers must be skilled in using language teaching materials in such a creative manner that learners realize by themselves the progress they are making in the language learning endeavor. They should find the class so exciting that they look forward to having more of those experiences.

The tradition of foreign language teaching in Nigeria has not been a happy one. Schools in Britain had for a very long time adopted the classical humanist curriculum with its socially divisive pattern of an intellectually demanding curriculum for elitist schools and a practical one for the masses. French and other prestigious foreign languages were viewed as subjects capable of promoting intellectual capacities and were taught in a manner that would achieve this purpose. Clark (1987:9) states:

It is interesting to reflect that whereas in most European countries the learning of a second language has for many years been considered ... sufficiently intellectually and culturally stimulating for the elite, yet adequately practical and relevant to the life expectations of the masses for it to be part of the curriculum for all, in Britain it was until recently considered suitable only for the elite.

Learners were presented with rules which explain how sentences are constructed and- were expected to construct sentences on the basis of the rules; they had to analyze sentences into their constituent parts and do some translation. The spoken language received very little attention. This intellectual orientation in the teaching of French was inherited in Nigeria and is still very common in the sense that grammatical explanations, not practice, tend to receive a high level of attention.

One must admit that in recent years, there have been some advances in the area of materials used for the teaching of French in Nigerian schools. First, there have been innovations in the objectives and course book content. Instead of having different chapters devoted to the teaching of nouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, and so on, we have sections dealing with practical language acts, for example, promising, advising, refusing, seeking permission. Second, the scope of the programme is wider. Instead of one textbook-based course, there are some taped materials, visuals and supplementary readers. However, the problem of availability of funds remains a big threat to the success of the French programme. It would be useful at this point to examine the use of materials in the context of language teaching methods.

Language Teaching Methods and Use of Materials

Four main types of language teaching methods can be identified - the grammar-translation or traditional method, the direct method, the audio-lingual method and the communicative competence approach. The grammar-translation method places emphasis on the acquisition of language form, that is, on the mastery of the grammar of the language. The implicit belief here is that a person who has not mastered the grammar of language cannot use that language effectively to perform language functions. The method presents language rules to learners with examples of how the rules are used to generate phrases, clauses and sentences. Learners are presented with short reading passages which contain sentences similar to the ones presented as examples. The students are free to use the mother tongue or the language of the school (e.g. English in Nigeria) in answering questions on the passage. Learners are given lots of written exercises but the oral component of language (pronunciation, stress, intonation, oral communication practice) is neglected. Needless to say, learners spend several years studying the language without being able to speak it.

The direct method places emphasis on oral practice. It insists on the use of only the target language in all aspects of language learning. It seeks to employ the same process through which a child learns his mother tongue. Children are not exposed to language rules but are guided to use (the language to perform real functions, for example, describing real objects or pictures in one's environment, requesting for something, asking authentic questions and so on. This method uses a lot of materials, for example, real objects, pictures, maps, charts and so on. It employs mimes and systematically relates class conversations to objects and events (for example, standing up, writing, going to the door, etc.) in the classroom, in the school yard, and finally, in the community. A great deal of attention is given to the various aspects of the oral component of language (stress, intonation, etc.). The method generally proves successful in making learners speak the language but is very demanding on the part of the teacher.

The audio-lingual method is based on the work of two groups of specialists, the behavioural psychologists and the structural linguists. We do not have space here to present the contributions of these two groups to the emergence of this method. Suffice it to say that the method lays emphasis on speaking but insists that errors must not be allowed to occur in the language learning environment. Because of this, language elements must be presented in bits; each element must be mastered before another is presented. This extreme gradualism made it impossible for reasonable grounds to be covered, hence the failure of the method. Students spent many years learning the rudiments of language without actually using the elements to communicate meaning.

The communicative competence approach is designed to enable learners practice using the language to do something right from the first day of language learning. A small number of objects and events are taught in the context of communicative practice, for example, 'mon stylo', 'mon crayon', 'mon livre', 'ou est mon stylo?', 'sur la table', 'sur la chaise', 'dans le sac'. The teacher divides the class into groups for the communicative practice and goes round to monitor the students' performance, assisting where there is need to do so. This method is, perhaps, the most effective of all the methods so far developed. It comprises linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence discourse competence, and strategic competence.

Linguistic competence involves the mastery of grammar. The teacher is expected to use whatever method he finds suitable to teach the grammar of the language in appropriate contexts of communication. Sociolinguistic competence involves the use of appropriate language forms to address others. Discourse competence is the ability of the language learner to produce a text (oral or written) which displays adequate coherence and cohesion. The strategic competence relates is the

strategies one uses to ensure that there is no communication breakdown in the course of a conversation.

Selection and Utilization of Materials

The communicative competence approach to language learning lays emphasis on, among other things, interest and authenticity. In real life, we talk about what has relevance for us and we ask questions to discover what we do not know. Therefore, in the classroom, the focus, especially at higher levels, is on materials which help to elicit students' views and opinions, and on the creation of situations which lead students to share information which is not available to other members of the class.

Technological advancement has made a large body of materials available on the market. In Ellington and Race's (1993: 24) classification scheme, the authors include the following:

1. Printed and duplicated materials;
2. Non-projected display materials;
3. Still projected display materials;
4. Audio materials;
5. Linked audio and still visual materials;
6. Video materials;
7. Computer-mediated materials.

Financial constraint and lack of resourcefulness have made it difficult for many of these materials to be found in Nigerian schools.

However, the teachers' choice of a particular medium will depend on a number of factors, especially the availability of materials (newspapers and magazines, cartoon books, audio tapes and so on), availability of relevant equipment (tape recorders, projectors, radio, video tape recorders, etc.) and the type of language lesson envisaged. Price (1987: 156) "has rightly pointed out that the effective use of any medium in language teaching depends on "the role the message in that medium plays in the language learning situation (for example, as model or stimulus), the content of the materials, and the ways these two interact within each student's language learning experience".

When such materials as newspaper cuttings, pictures and labels in the target language are displayed in the classroom, or when information on the life of people in the target community is provided through video tapes, these elements act only as models. They merely present to students a real picture of life in the target community. They become a stimulus only when students begin to interact with the materials. In the classroom where the teacher adopts the communicative approach to teaching, exercises are arranged so as to permit learners to interact with materials and other students in a meaningful manner.

As part of an on-going research into the availability and utilization of materials for the teaching of French in Port Harcourt secondary schools, the present writer discovered that there is a general lack of teaching materials for the teaching of French. Table 1.1 presents the responses of nineteen French language teachers on the availability of instructional materials in their schools (eight in number).

As can be seen from the responses, the schools generally do not have even such simple and inexpensive materials as pictures, maps, flash cards and flip charts. Similarly, only a tiny percentage of schools have radio, radio cassettes, television set, and video recorder. Certainly, the schools have not created a conducive environment for the teaching of French but the teacher should accept the challenge and create inexpensive materials to ensure success at his teaching task.

Table 1.1: French Teachers' Responses on the Availability of Instructional Materials

	Degree Of Availability					
	Available and Sufficient		Available but Not		Not Available	Total
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Pictures	0	0.0	1		18	94.7
Maps	1	5.3	1		17	89.5
Flash Cards	0	0.0	2		17	89.5
Flip Charts	0	0.0	1		18	94.7
Radio Cassettes	1	5.3	2		16	84.2
Radio	2	11.2	2		13	76.5
TV Set	1	5.3	3		15	76.5
Video Cassettes	0	0.0	1		18	94.7
Video recorder	1	5.3	0		18	94.7
Slides	0		0		19	100.0
Slide projector	0		0		19	100.0
Film strips	0	0.0	0		19	100.0
Film Projectors	0		0		19	100.0
Overhead	0		0		19	100.0

One type of habit many teachers should overcome is the tendency to think that if the school does not supply such equipment as the video recorder or the slide projector, there is nothing they can do other than to teach French without instructional materials. They fail to realize that there is a lot they can do themselves, in conjunction with the learners or other teachers. In his influential book *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*, Schumacher (1973: 65-66) states: "What I wish to emphasize is the *duality* of the human requirement when it comes to the question of size: there is no *single* answer. For his different purposes, man needs many different structures, both small ones and large ones". He laments that one of the ailments of man in the contemporary world is "an almost universal idolatry of giantism".

Suitable Approaches to Material Production and Utilization in Nigerian Classrooms

A resourceful French teacher would not allow lack of funds to dampen his enthusiasm to teach the language. Cheap materials abound that can be used in a creative manner as stimulus for student-student interaction. Old copies of French newspapers can easily be obtained from a number of sources. The teacher cuts a story into strips and divides the students into groups. He shuffles the strips and asks the students to reorder the strips to recreate the story. They may be asked to justify the order in which they put the strips together. The pictures in the newspapers and their captions may also be shuffled. Students are simply asked to match them.

Another type of exercise is the creation of information gap. The task students have to perform is to supply the missing elements in order to recreate the entire story. Different sections of a story in the target language are made available to different groups of students. Each group is meant to go to other groups to ask questions till they are able to discover the content of the section of the story given to the other group. Thus, if a story is divided into three, each section is given to a specific group. Each group has to interact with the two other groups in order to discover the sequence of events in the story. When this is done, each group writes down the complete story the way it understands it and hands over the group's version to the teacher. Next, each group appoints a reporter to present its version of the story to the whole class. The gap between the real story (which is available only to the teacher) and the versions produced by the different groups is bound to be exciting.

Perhaps the most exciting experience a learner may have with respect to the target culture is the opportunity to visit the country where the target language is spoken. But because of financial constraints, such visits may not be possible for most secondary schools in Nigeria. Such visits can be simulated. This can be done in a number of ways (Melvin and Stout, 1987). In the example presented here, six stages can be identified.

Table 1.1: French Teachers' Responses on the Availability of Instructional Materials

	Degree Of Availability							
	Available and Sufficient		Available but Not Sufficient		Not Available		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Pictures	0	0.0	1	5.3	18	94.7	19	100.0
Maps	1	5.3	1	5.3	17	89.5	19	100.0
Flash Cards	0	0.0	2	11.2	17	89.5	19	100.0
Flip Charts	0	0.0	1	5.3	18	94.7	19	100.0
Radio Cassettes	1	5.3	2	10.5	16	84.2	19	100.0
Radio	2	11.2	2	11.5	13	76.5	19	100.0
TV Set	1	5.3	3	15.8	15	76.5	19	100.0
Video Cassettes	0	0.0	1	5.3	18	94.7	19	100.0
Video recorder	1	5.3	0	0.0	18	94.7	19	100.0
Slides	0	0.0	0	0.0	19	100.0	19	100.0
Slide projector	0	0.0	0	0.0	19	100.0	19	100.0
Film strips	0	0.0	0	0.0	19	100.0	19	100.0
Film Projectors	0	0.0	0	0.0	19	100.0	19	100.0
Overhead Projectors	0	0.0	0	0.0	19	100.0	19	100.0

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1. **Collection of Materials by the Teacher:** The teacher may want the students to simulate a visit to Lome. He makes efforts to collect all kinds of materials on the city covering such aspects as the municipal government, the judiciary, government house, educational institutions, libraries, the country-side, recreational establishments, museums, theatres, hotels and restaurants, tourist brochures, city map and information on public transportation, hospitals, shopping opportunities, banks and currency, advertisements covering areas of interest and information on mass media. The teacher may travel to Lome to collect these materials and take photographs of areas of interest. Alternatively he may source the required information through friends traveling to Lome or resident in that city. He may also collect information and materials from the Togolcse High Commission in Nigeria.
2. **Grouping of Materials and the Establishment of Exercises:** All the materials are assembled and arranged to cover specific themes, for example, government and its functions, health, education, communication, and so on. The teacher groups related themes together to correspond with the number of groups into which he wishes to divide the class. If he establishes five groups, for example, he prepares different exercises for five groups of students, depending on the types of materials they are expected to work on. The exercises are designed to assist students organise their presentation to the class and to suggest the kinds of activities they may use, for example, the presentation of local songs and interesting scenes through the use of video tapes.
3. **Grouping of Students.** The teacher divides the class into groups. He presents them with guidelines for class presentation and the use of exercises. The students are given one week for preparation.
4. **Group Presentation.** The students present what they had prepared group by group. The presentation can be varied to suit different levels of students and to achieve different purposes. It can be made to appear as a detailed plan of a tour yet to be undertaken, or a tour that is taking place at the time of reporting, or as a description of a tour that has just been concluded.
5. **Question and Response Session.** After the presentation by each group, the class is given ample opportunity to pose questions on any aspects of the tour. At the end of the presentation, the teacher gives a general feedback to the various groups.
6. **Documentation.** With the help of the teacher, each group submits a written report on the presentation. All the reports are collected by the teacher, bound and preserved for future use by different classes.

Conclusion

Teaching French in Nigeria is not just a matter of making it possible for Nigerians to read French journals for recreational purposes. Rather, it is an integral part of strategies for national development in a wide range of areas and, therefore, needs to be accorded the seriousness it deserves. If the opportunities offered by educational technology are appropriately utilized, the language can be made to respond to societal needs effectively.

Recommendations

The implementation of the following recommendations should help to improve the teaching of French:

1. Schools should purchase affordable materials for French teaching and make plans for consistent increase in the stock acquired;
2. Good storage should be provided to ensure adequate preservation of materials;
3. Teachers should be provided with funds to improvise cheap materials such as flash cards and flip charts;
4. Teachers should be encouraged to share experiences in material improvisation; and

5. Each state should have audio-visual centres where schools can borrow more expensive materials (e.g. film and overhead projectors).

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