

LANGUAGE IDEOLOGY: LEARNING FRENCH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA

Adigwe, Joseph Chinedu

Delta State University, Abraka
Department of Languages and Linguistics

Abstract

Learning a foreign language can sometimes be unbearably challenging. Over the years, research has revealed that some of these challenges are as a result of poor human and infrastructural resources as well as teaching aids and methods. However, this study focuses on linguistic ideologies related to learning French as a foreign language in Nigeria. The study investigates how preconceived ideas about French language affect student's ability to effectively learn the language. The study adopts the sociolinguistics approach. It analyses responses from French language learners and trainers in different French language training centres across three (3) States: Delta, Edo and Bayelsa. The sample comprises 20 training centres and the respondents include both learners and trainers. The instrument for data collection is the questionnaire. The study adopts the simple percentage analysis. The results from the analysis reveal that some preconceived ideologies or notions about the French language have negative impact on the student's ability to learn French as a foreign language in Nigeria. Arising from the findings, the study proposes some recommendations that can minimize this negative influence.

Key words: Foreign language, ideology, language ideology, French language, language centre.

Introduction

Learning a foreign language can be a challenging but rewarding experience. When it comes to learning French, there are often preconceived notions and language ideologies that can impact a student's ability to effectively learn the language. These ideologies can stem from cultural stereotypes, historical events, or even personal biases. Language ideology refers to the belief systems surrounding languages and their usage within a specific social context. In Nigeria, a country known for its linguistic diversity, the learning of foreign languages such as French has become increasingly popular. In the context of Nigeria, where English is the official language, learning a foreign language such as French can be influenced by various language ideologies.

According to Kroskrity (2000), language ideology refers to the beliefs, attitudes, and values that people hold about languages and their speakers. In Nigeria, there is a prevailing ideology that places high value on proficiency in the English language due to its colonial history and global importance. However, the increasing globalization

and the need for intercultural communication have led to a growing interest in learning other foreign languages, particularly French.

According to Meristo (2022), one common language ideology surrounding French could be the idea that it is a difficult language to learn. This belief may stem from the complexities of French grammar, the use of gendered nouns, or the pronunciation of certain sounds that may be unfamiliar to English speakers. However, it is important to approach learning French with an open mind and a positive attitude, as these language ideologies can hinder progress and motivation.

Another language ideology related to learning French is the notion that French is a romantic language, often associated with love and sophistication (Robert, Marion & Ursula, 2002). While French does have a reputation for its rich literary and cultural history, it is important to remember that language learning is a complex process that requires dedication and practice. Romanticizing the language may lead to unrealistic expectations and frustration when faced

with the challenges of learning a new language.

Additionally, there may be language ideologies related to the perceived superiority of French speakers or the idea that speaking French is a mark of intelligence or sophistication. These beliefs can create feelings of inadequacy or intimidation for learners, especially if they do not fit the stereotype of a typical French speaker. It is important to remember that language is a tool for communication and cultural exchange, and that proficiency in a language does not determine one's worth or intelligence (Ukeje, 2016). This article explores the language ideology surrounding the learning of French as a foreign language in Nigeria.

Statement of the problem

One of the main challenges faced by individuals learning French in Nigeria is the prevailing language ideology that favours English as the dominant language. English is the official language in Nigeria, and it is widely used in government, education, and business. As a result, many Nigerians view English as the language of prestige and power, while other languages, including French, are often marginalized and seen as less important. Prior to their French language training, learners often hear certain misconceptions or notions about the French language. Most of these preconceived ideas or notions could be responsible for learner's inability to effectively learn the language. This language ideology probably could create barriers for individuals who are trying to learn French in Nigeria. It could lead to feelings of inadequacy and inferiority when using French, as well as lack of motivation to continue learning the language. Additionally, the lack of support for French language learning in Nigeria, both in terms of resources and opportunities, could further reinforce this negative language ideology. To better understand how language ideologies impact the learning of French in Nigeria, it is important to examine the beliefs and perceptions that learners hold about the language.

Objective of the study

This study seeks to:

- I. identify some preconceived ideas about the French language in Nigeria;

- II. investigate how preconceived ideas about French language affect student's ability to effectively learn the language in Nigeria;
- III. proffer solution to the barrier caused by French language ideology.

Research questions

- I. what are the preconceived ideas about learning French language in Nigeria?
- II. in what ways does preconceived ideas about French language affect student's ability to effectively learn the language in Nigeria?
- III. what measures can be taken to correct these preconceived ideas?

French as a Foreign Language in Nigeria: Strategies and Benefits

Learning a foreign language can be a challenging yet rewarding experience. One of the most popular languages to learn is French, known for its rich cultural history and widespread use in global communication. French is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world, with over 220 million speakers globally. In Nigeria, French is recognized as an official language alongside English and multiple indigenous languages. The importance of learning French in Nigeria can be attributed to several factors, such as economic opportunities, cultural exchange, and diplomatic relations with French-speaking countries.

According to Omoye (2017), Nigeria's economy is closely linked to that of French-speaking countries in West Africa, such as Benin, Togo, and Cameroon. By learning French, Nigerians can tap into job opportunities in these neighboring countries and enhance their prospects in sectors such as trade, tourism, and international relations. French is a language of culture and arts, with France known for its rich literary tradition, fashion, cuisine, and cinema. By learning French, Nigerians can engage with French culture and heritage, fostering greater cultural exchange and understanding between the two countries (Omoye, 2017). Oluranti (2012) opines that Nigeria maintains diplomatic relations with several French-speaking countries and is a member of international organizations such as the International Organization of La Francophonie. Proficiency in French can facilitate

communication and cooperation with these countries, enhancing Nigeria's diplomatic standing on the global stage. Despite the benefits of learning French in Nigeria, there are challenges and perceptions surrounding the language. Some Nigerians view French as a colonial language and prioritize the promotion of indigenous languages over foreign ones. Additionally, limited access to quality French language education and resources can hinder the effective learning of the language.

As for Ajiboye (1993), one of the key strategies for learning French is immersion. This involves surrounding oneself with the language as much as possible, whether by conversing with native speakers, watching French films and TV shows, or reading French literature. Immersion helps to improve listening and speaking skills, as well as cultural understanding. Another important strategy is consistent practice. Like any skill, learning a language requires regular practice to maintain and improve proficiency. This can be achieved through daily vocabulary drills, grammar exercises, and speaking practice with language partners or tutors.

The benefits of learning French are vast. Beyond the ability to communicate with over 220 million French speakers worldwide, mastering the language opens doors to opportunities in business, travel, and academia (Ariole, 2010). French is also one of the official languages of major international organizations such as the United Nations and the European Union, making it a valuable asset for global careers. According to Adigwe (2019), it is important for an anglophone to have a perfect mastery of the French language given the opportunities it unlocks. The French language holds a special significance in Nigeria as it is one of the official languages of the African Union and is widely spoken across West Africa. The language is also associated with cultural prestige and sophistication, making it an attractive choice for individuals seeking to enhance their global competitiveness and cultural understanding.

The Concept of Language Ideology

The concept of language ideology is a crucial aspect of linguistic studies, as it helps us understand the social, cultural, and political factors that shape language use and attitudes in society. According to Kroskrity (2000), language ideology

refers to the beliefs, attitudes, and values that people hold about language, including ideas about what constitutes "proper" or "correct" language, as well as perceptions of different language varieties and speakers.

One key aspect of language ideology is the notion of linguistic prestige, which refers to the social status or value assigned to certain languages or language varieties. For example, in many societies, standard or dominant languages are often seen as more prestigious than dialects or minority languages. This has implications for language policy and planning, as well as for individuals' perceptions of their own linguistic abilities and identities.

Another important component of language ideology is the idea of linguistic purity, which involves beliefs about the "purity" or "correctness" of a particular language or dialect. These beliefs can lead to language discrimination and prejudice against speakers of non-standard or minority languages, perpetuating social inequalities and reinforcing power dynamics.

Bucholtz & Hall (2005) believe that language ideology also influences language use in various domains, such as education, media, and politics. For example, language ideologies can shape the curriculum and teaching practices in schools, influencing which languages are taught and how they are taught. In the media, language ideologies can influence the representation of different language varieties and speakers, perpetuating stereotypes and reinforcing dominant language norms.

Effects of Foreign Language Ideology

Foreign language ideology refers to the beliefs, attitudes, and values that individuals or societies hold towards languages that are different from their native language. These ideologies often shape how foreign languages are valued, learned, and used in various contexts. In this article, we will explore the effects of foreign language ideology on individuals and societies. Holliday (1999) reveals that one of the primary effects of foreign language ideology is the perception of linguistic hierarchies. In many societies, certain languages are viewed as prestigious or superior to others, leading to the

marginalization of minority languages. This can result in language loss, as speakers of minority languages may be discouraged from using their native language in favor of the dominant language. For example, in many countries around the world, English is often seen as a more valuable language to learn compared to local indigenous languages, leading to a decline in the use of these minority languages (Dwyer, 2010).

Another effect of foreign language ideology is the reinforcement of cultural stereotypes and prejudices. When individuals or societies hold negative beliefs about a particular language or culture, it can lead to discrimination and social exclusion. This can have detrimental effects on individuals' self-esteem and identity, as well as perpetuate harmful stereotypes. For instance, the portrayal of certain languages as "inferior" or "less intelligent" can contribute to the stigmatization of individuals who speak those languages (Hill, 2002). Foreign language ideology can also impact social mobility and access to opportunities. In many cases, individuals who speak multiple languages are viewed more favorably in the job market and have greater access to educational and economic opportunities. However, individuals who speak languages that are not considered socially prestigious may face barriers to social mobility and economic advancement. This can create inequalities in society based on language proficiency and perpetuate linguistic discrimination (Holliday, 1999).

French Language Training Centres in Nigeria

In recent years, there has been a growing demand for French language training in Nigeria. As a result, various language training centers have emerged across the country to cater to this increasing need. These centers offer a variety of courses tailored to different proficiency levels, from beginners to advanced learners.

One prominent French language training center in Nigeria is the Alliance Française. With branches in major cities such as Lagos, Abuja, and Port Harcourt, the Alliance Française offers a wide range of courses for individuals of all ages. According to a report by the French Embassy in Nigeria (2019), the Alliance Française in Nigeria has seen a significant increase in enrollment over

the past decade, reflecting the growing interest in learning the French language. Another popular option for French language training in Nigeria is the French Institute for Research in Africa (IFRA). Located in Ibadan, the IFRA offers French language courses in addition to research programs and cultural events. The institute's language training programs are designed to help students develop their language skills in a dynamic and interactive environment.

In addition to these established institutions, there are also smaller language training centers and private tutors offering French language courses in Nigeria (Ariole, 2010). These options cater to individuals who prefer more personalized instruction or have specific learning goals that may not be met by traditional language training programmes. Overall, the availability of French language training centers in Nigeria reflects the country's increasing recognition of the importance of multilingualism in today's globalized world. By providing individuals with the opportunity to learn French, these centers are not only helping to bridge cultural and linguistic barriers but also opening up new opportunities for personal and professional growth.

Methodology

Over the years, preconceived ideas about the French language have played a significant role in shaping learners' perceptions and attitudes towards learning French. To gain a deeper understanding of the impact of these preconceived ideas, a questionnaire was designed and administered to 100 respondents including learners and trainers from twenty (20) French language training centres in three (3) States: Delta, Edo and Bayelsa.

Population, Sample and Sampling Technics

The population of the study comprises the French language centres in Delta State, Edo State and Bayelsa State. Through a random sampling technique, this study sampled twenty (20) French language training centres, both public and private alike, from three (3) different States notably Delta, Edo and Bayelsa. In general, the following is the sample breakdown: seven (7) language centres from Delta State, eight (8) from Edo State and finally five (5) centres from Bayelsa State.

Collection and analysis

Data was collected through a virtual questionnaire from one hundred (100) respondents. The learners sampled in this study cut across the beginner, the

intermediate and the advanced levels. The data collected was analysed using a simple percentage. The data is presented in tabular form followed by a brief analysis.

Data Presentation and Analysis

I. Research question one: preconceived ideas about learning French language in Nigeria

Table 1: what is your initial impression of the French language?

Response Options	Number of respondents	Percentage
French is a very difficult language	39	39%
The French are racist	05	5%
French language is more difficult than English	36	36%
French language has too many grammatical rules	20	20%
TOTAL	100	100%

In table 1, a good number of respondents (39%) believe that French language is a very difficult language. Few (5%) are not enthusiastic about the language because for them, the French are racist. Most (36%) of the respondents believe that the French language is more difficult than the English language while 20% are of the opinion that French language has too many grammatical rules.

Table 2: Prior to your training, did you think French grammar is more complex than English grammar?

Response Options	Number of respondents	Percentage
Yes	77	60%
No	23	20%
TOTAL	100	100%

Table 2 reveals that majority (77%) agree that prior to their training, they were informed that the French grammar is more complex than the English grammar while only 22% do not agree that the French grammar is more complex than the English grammar.

Table 3: what was your idea about French pronunciations prior to your study?

Response Options	Number of respondents	Percentage
romantic	10	10%
difficult	75	75%
normal	15	15%
TOTAL	100	100%

In table 3 above, 10% of the respondents reveal that pronouncing French words is quite romantic while majority 75% consider French pronunciations difficult. Few of the respondents (15%) consider French pronunciations as normal.

Table 4: Do you believe learning French requires a natural talent for languages?

Response Options	Number of respondents	Percentage
Yes	87	87%
No	13	19%
TOTAL	100	100%

Table 4 shows that most (87%) of the respondents are of the opinion that the French language is best understood or mastered effectively by persons who have talent for languages whereas, only few (13%) are of contrary opinion.

Table 5: Have you heard any stereotypes or misconceptions about French speakers?

Response Options	Number of respondents	Percentage
Yes	87	87%
No	13	19%
TOTAL	100	100%

In table 5, almost all the respondents that is (87%) have heard one stereotype or the other. While few (13%) respondents have absolutely no misconception about the language.

Table 6: before your training, were you told that learning French language is only useful for travel?

Response Options	Number of respondents	Percentage
Yes	65	65%
No	35	35%
TOTAL	100	100%

Table 6 reveals that majority (65%) of the learners believed that learning French language is for the sole purpose of traveling whereas, 35% of the respondents had contrary beliefs.

Table 7: What discourages you the most in learning French language?

Response Options	Number of respondents	Percentage
Inaccessible job opportunities	40	37%
Learning takes place outside the French culture	50	06%
Zero motivation	10	36%
TOTAL	100	100%

Table 7 shows that majority (40%) of the respondents are demotivated by the inaccessibility of job opportunity for French language while, 50% are discouraged because the learning takes place outside the francophone milieu. Furthermore, 10% of respondents agreed that they not motivated to read the language.

Table 8: Have you experienced any challenges or obstacles in learning French?

Response Options	Number of respondents	Percentage
Yes	50	50%
No	00	00%
Many	42	42%
Just few	8	8%
TOTAL	100	100%

Table 8 above shows that majority (50%) have experienced challenges or obstacle in the course of learning the French language. Most of the respondents (42%) reveal that they have encountered and encountering many challenges in learning French language whereas, only very few (8%) of them reveal that they have or are only faced with just few challenges.

Table 9: prior to your training, did you think that one can only learn the language while living with native French speakers?

Response Options	Number of respondents	Percentage
Yes	50	50%
No	08	00%
maybe	42	42%
TOTAL	100	100%

In table 9 above, most (50%) of the respondents agree that prior to their training, they believed that only persons living with native French speakers can effectively learn the French language whereas, only 8% responded in the negative while 42% are not quite convinced.

Table 10: How do you think the French language is perceived by others in Nigeria?

Response Options	Number of respondents	Percentage
Very relevant but very stressful	20	20%
Very challenging and difficult to access jobs	50	50%
Not relevant at all in the Nigerian society	30	30%
TOTAL	100	100%

In table 10, few (20%) of the respondents believe that other Nigerians consider the French language to be very relevant but stressful while half (50%) of the respondents reveal that in Nigeria, majority consider the French language to be very challenging and difficult to have good jobs after learning the language. In the same vein, 30% of the respondent's state that in Nigeria, learning the French language is not relevant at all in the Nigerian society.

Research question 2: ways through which preconceived ideas about French language affect student's ability to effectively learn the language

Table 11: how do you perceive your progress in learning French compared to your initial expectations?

Response Options	Number of respondents	Percentage
Remarkable	10	10%
Not remarkable due to previously conceived ideas	50	50%
Not great and too late to improve	10	10%
So far, progress is commendable but could have been better without discouraging preconceived ideas.	30	30%
TOTAL	100	100%

In table 11, very few (10%) respondents acknowledged they are making remarkable progress in learning French language while majority 50% reveal that due to previously conceived ideas about the language, they seem not to be making any headway. Furthermore, 10% of the respondents think that it is too late to make improvement as their level of French is low. A good number of respondents agreed that they have made

progress but could have made huge progress without discouraging preconceived notions or ideas about the language.

Table 12: What is your current attitude towards learning French language?

Response Options	Number of respondents	Percentage
Lukewarm	60	60%
Enthusiastic	20	20%
excited	9	9%
Indifferent	11	11%
TOTAL	100	100%

As shown in table 12, majority of the respondents 60 (60%) responded to have lukewarm attitude towards learning French, while 20 (20%) agreed that are excited about French language and 9 (9%) reveal that they are excited. However, 11 (11) respondents are indifferent towards French language None of the respondent responded positive to this question.

Table 13: How do you perceive the importance of French in Nigerian society?

Response Options	Number of respondents	Percentage
Knowledge of French language is important in the nigerian society	64	64%
Knowledge of French language	36	36%
TOTAL	100	100%

As shown in table 13 above, majority (64%) consider the French language important. Whereas, minority (36%) do not think the French language is important to them.

Table 14: How do you view the cultural significance of the French language?

Response Options	Number of respondents	Percentage
Very relevant	28	28%
Relevant	11	11%
Not so relevant	31	31%
Not relevant at all	30	30%
TOTAL	100	100%

In table 14, 31% of the respondents are of the opinion that French language has high cultural significance in the society while few (11%) of them believe that it is relevant. Majority (31%) of the respondents consider the French language not so relevant whereas a good number (30%) of the respondents believe it is not relevant at all.

Table 15: Do you believe that speaking French can enhance your career opportunities?

Response Options	Number of respondents	Percentage
Yes	57	57%
No	43	43%
TOTAL	100	100%

Table 15 reveals that, although most of the respondents agree that the knowledge of French language can unlock job opportunities for them, some respondents (43%) do not share the same conviction.

Table 15: how useful were the ideas you received about French language before your training?

Response Options	Number of respondents	Percentage
Very useful	27	27%
Not useful at all	73	73%
TOTAL	100	100%

Table 15 shows that 27% of the respondents agreed that the ideas received about French language prior to their training was helpful to them whereas majority reveal that the preconceived ideas they had prior to their training was not useful at all, on the contrary, it hindered motivation.

Research question 3: what are the measures to be taken to correct these preconceived ideas?

Table 16: what can be done to boost learners’ motivation and reduce misconceptions about the French language in Nigeria?

Response Options	Number of respondents	Percentage
Publicize French language job opportunities	10	10%
Trainers are to adopt measures to boost the self-confidence of learners	50	50%
Resource persons should be invited, especially native speakers, to encourage the learning of French	40	40%
TOTAL	100	100%

From the table above, 10% feel that if French jobs are publicized, negative notions or ideas about the language will reduce drastically whereas, majority (50%) believe that trainers need to adopt measures that will help boost the self-confidence of learners and this will help encourage learners irrespective of their previously conceived notion about the language. Finally, 40% of the respondents suggest that there is need to collaborate with resource persons especially native speakers, to encourage the learning of French.

Summary of Findings

The questions focused explore various aspects of preconceived ideas about the French language, such as stereotypes, misconceptions, and attitudes towards French language learning. The responses from both students and teachers provide valuable insights into the ways in which these preconceived ideas shape students' learning experiences attitudes towards the learning of French language. The following are the findings from the analysis:

- i. that many French language learners have preconceived ideas or notions about the language.
- ii. most French language learners have lost enthusiasm and motivation as a result of preconceived ideas about learning the French language
- iii. some negative preconceived ideas that hinder the learning of the French language include the complex language structure, difficulty in mastering the language, pronunciation and the inaccessibility of French jobs;

- iv. that addressing these stereotypes and promoting a positive image of the French culture requires that trainers adopt certain measures to boost self-confidence in order to create a supportive and inclusive learning environment for students and help promote open-minded approach towards learning French;
- v. that resource persons should be invited, especially native speakers, to address learners from time to time, to encourage the learning of French language.

Recommendations

One key recommendation is to promote a positive attitude towards French language learning through the adoption of certain measures to boost the self-confidence among learners in order to create a supportive and inclusive learning environment for students and help promote open-minded approach towards learning French; Additionally, it is essential to provide opportunities for learners to engage with French native speakers from time to time in and outside the classroom. This could include immersion

programmes, cultural exchanges, or language clubs that allow learners to practice and improve their language skills in real-life settings.

Conclusion

The language ideology surrounding the learning of French as a foreign language in Nigeria is multifaceted. While the language offers numerous benefits in terms of economic opportunities, cultural exchange, and diplomatic relations, challenges exist in perceptions and access to quality education. Moving forward, a balanced approach that values both indigenous languages and foreign languages like French is essential for Nigeria to fully harness the potential of linguistic diversity.

By understanding the complex interplay of beliefs, attitudes, and values surrounding language, we can work towards creating more inclusive and equitable language practices and policies. By challenging these ideologies and approaching language learning with an open mind and a positive attitude, students can overcome barriers and achieve their language learning goals. French is a beautiful and diverse language that offers a window into the rich cultural heritage of France and other Francophone countries. Embrace the challenges, celebrate the successes, and remember that language learning is a journey worth embarking on. So why not embark on the exciting journey of learning French today?

References

- Adigwe, J.C. (2019). Les Conséquences et la Réalité Socio-Politique dans *Allah n'est pas Obligé* d'Ahmadou Kourouma. *Abraka Humanities Review*. Vol. 9 (1). pp 101– 111.
- Ajiboye, T. (1993). Foreign Language Learning in Nigeria: Stop or encore? A ten-minute paper presented at Nigeria Interlanguage Fair (NEXPOLINGUA)
- Ariole, V. (2010). La Planification Linguistique dans un Milieu Plurilingue. In T. Ajiboye (dir.). *Linguistique et Applications Pédagogiques. Regards sur le Français Langue Etrangère*. Clean Slate Books, Ibadan.
- Bucholtz, M., & Hall, K. (2005). Identity and interaction: A sociocultural linguistic approach. *Discourse Studies*, 7(4-5), 585-614.
- Crystal, D. (2003). *English as a global language*. Cambridge University Press.
- Dwyer, A. (2010). Linguistic hegemony and minority language survival: The case of Galician in Spain. *Language Policy*, 9(4), 347-366.
- Hill, J. (2002). Addressing identity in language learning through a critical approach to culture. *TESOL Quarterly*, 36(3), 503-524.
- Holliday, A. (1999). Small cultures. *Applied Linguistics*, 20(2), 237-264.
- Jones, A. & Brown, K. (2019). Strategies for Effective Language Learning. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 7(1), 112-125.
- Kroskirty, P. (2000). Regimenting languages: Language ideological perspectives. In P. Kroskirty (Ed.), *Regimes of language: Ideologies, politics, and identities* (pp. 1-34). Santa Fe, NM: *School of American Research Press*.
- Meristo, M. (2022). University Students' Motivation to Study the French Language: A Time Trend Study. *Journal for the Psychology of Language Learning*. Vol. 4 (1). <https://doi.org/10.52598/jpll/4/1/4>.
- Oluranti O. (2012). Implementation of the Senior Secondary School French Curriculum in Lagos State: Problems and Prospects. *British Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*. ISSN: 20469578. 5 (1), 38 – 46.
- Omoye, M. I. (2017). French language education in Nigeria: Problems, prospects and the way forward. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 8(7), 144-149.
- Robert, B., Marion W., & Ursula, L. (2002). French is the language of Love and Stuff: Students' Perceptions of Issues Related to Motivation in Learning a Foreign Language. *British Educational Research Journal*. Vol.28 (4).
- Smith, J. (2020). The Benefits of Learning a Foreign Language. *Journal of Language Education*, 15(2), 45-58.
- Ukeje, B. O. (2016). The place of English and French in Nigeria's language policy. *Lingua*, 175-176, 249-264.