

The Role of Knowledge of Foreign Languages in Viable Service Delivery in Academic Libraries: The Perspective of The French Language in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of French language and French materials in sustainable library services in Anglophone academic libraries like Nigeria's. Due to the importance of French language in Nigeria, our institutions have been witnessing increase in the number of students in this field. Therefore, it is required that French language should have more recognition in terms of materials and personnel. This research which is based on the theory of social interaction by Jean Piaget and Lev Vygostky appealed to both primary and secondary sources of data. The researchers contacted related researches and also made a visit to Kogi State College of Education, Ankpa's library and had interaction with the staff. The purpose is to find out the level of competence of the college library staff in French language and to find out the condition of materials of French language in the library. The finding reveals that out of the 25 staff of the library, none could communicate in French. Also, the materials of French language (print and non-print) in the library are so scanty, not up to one percent of the materials available in the library. The few available materials of French language are archaic. These have posed certain teaching and learning difficulties to learners of French as foreign language in Nigeria.

Key words: academic library, library materials, French language, foreign language, library services.

Introduction

To achieve viable library services in Nigerian, the academic library must be equipped (both in materials and personnel) in such a way that it would meet the needs of every learner considering the fact that many learners and particularly French students from low income homes would depend mainly on the library for their academic work. In view of this it is very necessary that the academic library be equipped to meet these needs. (De Souza 2010) on this emphasized that 'one important enabling variable that has been either overlooked or underestimated in the professional literature, however, is access to library materials, in both the public and the school library'. In continuation, he recognizes that students from middle- and upper-middle-class backgrounds generally come from print-rich homes with parents who have formal education and can guide them through the educational system. This is not the case for many linguistically and culturally diverse students who come from low-income backgrounds and whose parents have minimal levels of formal education. To complete their school assignments and develop their literacy skills, these students rely mostly on books they can

check out from the school and the community public library. (1)

The staff in academic libraries in our institutions should be given training in French language; this will enhance communication with the learners. (Ward 2009) postulates that 'the reason for this training of academic library staff is to facilitate library services'. This aforementioned language skill will help the library staff to properly exploit information and adequately communicate with clients (Reser and Schunem, 1992). In other words, such a staff will facilitate a better realization of the curricula goals of the institution in which he/she serves. This paper therefore emphasizes that, the staff in Nigeria Academic libraries be proficient in French language so as to be able to offer effective and sustainable library services to their users without any language barrier.

Conceptual framework

The concept of academic library

A library is a collection of materials or media that are accessible for use and not just for display. Academic library is a type of library. Other types are: national library, digital library, children library, public library, research library

and several others. In present day library, collection can include printed materials and other physical resources in many formats such as DVDs, as well as access to information, music or other content held on bibliographic databases available for different categories of users. However, our focus in this work is on the academic library.

Academic libraries are located in various institution of learning. They are the type seen in Colleges, Polytechnics and University campuses. They are meant to serve the students in these institutions, although they can be accessible to members of the general public in whole or in part. (John 2013) defines academic library as ‘those special libraries found in educational institutions and whose main purpose is to the special purpose of serving the special needs of the specialized or homogenous clientele’. Being the basic unit of the information infrastructure of all academic entities, they strategically support and promote cutting edge research by way of working collectively with other faculty units in the struggle for the attainment of quality study aims.

In addition to providing materials, libraries also provide the services of librarians who are experts at finding and organizing information and at interpreting information needs, navigating and analyzing very large amounts of information with a variety of resources. Librarians contribute greatly in making students benefit from the resources in the library by guiding and directing the learners and users about in the library where their needs can be met. The power of the library in supporting student learning cannot be underestimated. The role of the library when it comes to French learners is our interest in this work. What impact does it have in their personal and academic lives? The academic library would make a positive difference in the lives of French students in our higher institutions if the barrier in communication is broken.

Souza (2010:2) emphasizing on the benefits of the library on student’s academic work says that students who have access to books both at home and at school simply read more; when they pursue the habit of leisure reading and do it frequently, they start experiencing the many benefits that derive from extensive reading: increased fluency, improved vocabulary, better

comprehension, and the development of higher-order thinking skills (2). For some of the French learners participating in the study, the library not only represented a welcome source of reading materials needed to complete school assignments, but also a safe and quiet place away from the unpleasantness of the daily challenges often faced by recent immigrant students like themselves.

Language and communication in the academic library

Language has been defined in many ways by different scholars. Through language, thoughts and feelings are conveyed. There are different kinds of language but we are concerned in this work with human language. (Maiunguwa 2015 :1) citing (Hughes, 1962) defined Language as ‘A system of arbitrary vocal symbols by which thought is conveyed’. Language is often said to be a means of communication among individuals who share a common code (Yule, 1985). Humans have inherent and universal ability to construct languages (codes) to communicate. It is natural. According to (Leclerc 1989:15) Language refers to the psychological faculties that make it possible to communicate using any communication system. Language is innate. Having similar view is (Sapir 1921) who states that ‘Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols. Further, he argued that language as a conscious act in which an individual is in control and chooses what he/she wishes to communicate and how to go about it.

On the other hand, Chomsky (1969) views language as an instinctive phenomenon guided by rules of which in most cases the speaker is ignorant of. He argued that every human has an inborn faculty known as *language* of which the expressed output is shaped by lots of factors such as the social environment and mood. Sharing the same view with Chomsky, Pinker (1994) in Poole (1999) maintains that language is “instinctive”. Elaborating on this point of view, Poole avers that “language is instinctive in so as far as we are all born with the Predisposition to speak” (p.5). Further, he argued that language is acquired without tuition and that our thoughts are unconsciously converted to speech when we speak. Poole (1999) therefore defines language as

“a medium of communication specific to a society” (p.6).

Although language is defined in several ways by different people as seen clearly above, one thing is certain, that is, language enables humans to communicate. Feelings, ideas, thoughts and emotions are expressed through language. Therefore, when there is difficulty in expressing our thoughts and emotions, its purpose is lost. It is incontrovertibly central to the entirety of human activities, whose functions are of crucial relevance not only to our collective existence but to the overall achievement of whatever aspirations we envisage in the society (Offor and Kamaluddeen). For the learners of French (FFL) to derive maximum benefits from our academic library therefore, language and communication must be improved upon. Library staff should be trained to be able to communicate with this group of students in French language. Also, the library organizational or direction chart directing library users to different sections of the library should equally be translated into French to ease their movement around the library.

The role of the library staff in an academic library

Libraries are usually staffed by a combination of professionally-trained librarians, paraprofessional staff sometimes called library technicians, and support staff. These staff are expected to have some levels of competence in French language to enable them communicate with learners of French, especially those who are not Anglophones and are new on campus. Gabbay and Shoham (2017) carried out a research work titled ‘How is the role of academic library workers perceived by both faculty members and library workers?’ In this work, we see certain roles, duties and responsibilities of a librarian. They are affiliated with a specific department and whose job is to maintain and nurture the relationship between the academic library and faculty members. Their duties among others include:

1. Counseling students and faculty regarding research.
2. Providing training to students, in a classroom environment, in library resources.

3. Consulting with the faculty about developing or reducing collections.
4. Updating the department about new library services and future plans.
5. Providing information on scholarly communication and open access.

The librarians report will not be complete if they had left French out of their findings due to language barrier. From the roles of library staff above, it is clear that communication plays a vital role in making library users achieve their purposes in the library. The library staff if well equipped with the knowledge of French language and has attained some levels of competence in speaking; such staff would be able to interact with a FFL learner and thereby guiding him and providing necessary assistance to make such student benefit maximally from the library resources.

Libraries are established to provide digital and physical access to materials for students searching for knowledge. Collections in the library therefore would include books, newspapers, periodicals and other print materials. Others are films, CDs, cassettes, DVDs, videotapes, audio books and other software materials which are meant to enhance learners’ performance in their various fields of learning. French language materials found in the school libraries of our various institutions are very few and nothing to write home about. The question is, if French students are to rely fully on the books and materials in our various institutions, how effective would they be in the knowledge of French language? See (Baro Emmanuel :101).

French courses offered in our schools centers mainly around four competence: listening, speaking, reading, and writing, (Elio and Leidy: 2015). Materials required to assist learners of French as foreign language (FLE) in achieving this goal are very scarce in our academic libraries. In the process of this work, our survey in some academic libraries on our campuses reveals that French materials on shelves are old books whose contents are not very relevant to what is in vogue today. It is therefore the responsibility of the library staff to make recommendation informing the management on the need to stock the library with the right French materials.

Theoretical Framework

This work is anchored on the theory of social interaction by Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. Social Interactionists' Theory (SIT) is an explanation of language development whose foundation was laid by Lev Vygotsky, a psychologist and a social constructivist. It emphasizes the role of social interaction between the developing child and linguistically knowledgeable adults and states that students learn through social interactions. According to Vygotsky, social interaction plays an important role in the learning process and proposed the zone of proximal development (ZPD) where learners construct the new language through socially mediated interaction. See (Woolfolk 2004). The theory is relevant to this research work as we view the academic library as a community where a healthy interaction between library staff and the learners of French as a foreign language enhances academic performance of learners.

Piaget also proposed that a child acts on his own environment for learning. Social interaction takes place mainly to move a young child away from egocentricism. Piaget according to (Woolfolk 2004) stated that a child either held the mental structure for conservation', this means that students learn through social interactions and their culture – much different from Piaget's theory. Through what Vygotsky called "dialogues," we socially interact and communicate with others to learn the cultural values of our society (45). Through these social interactions, we move toward more individualized thinking. The co-constructed process involves people interacting during shared activities, usually to solve a problem.

Social interaction plays a crucial role in the teaching and learning of foreign language. It enables the learners to acquire vocabularies, courage, sentence construction, and competence from others in the environment outside the four walls of the classroom. If a learner of French is privileged to have a library staff that has attained some level of fluency in French, from whom he/she acquires one or two words, this will in no doubt enhance such learner's performance. Applying this theory to this research work implies that the library staff and materials be well equipped and organized in such a way that they serve French learners in the academic

environment. French language should be used by library staff to direct and assist this group of learners, this way, interaction is created between the staff and the learners thereby encouraging them and creating the feeling of belonging in the learners' mind.

Training of Nigerian Academic Library Staff

There are several trainings a staff of an academic library can undergo to increase their relevance and usefulness to the learners of French as foreign language of our various institutions in Nigeria. Some of these trainings that we would be discussing in this work are: In-service training, ICT training and training on basic French.

In-service training for academic librarians

The need for continuing professional development for librarians in academic libraries in Nigeria is to be taken with all seriousness. The task of a librarian is a huge one and if he/she will do it effectively well as expected, then training will be required. The training as perceived by Shepherd (2010) is a means of addressing weaknesses in performance but, more importantly, it is a tool to enable staff to update their skills continually – essential in an environment of ongoing change'. (48). Over the years, the need for training of librarian staff by the Management of library and institutions of higher learning has not been identified. 'Training' is defined by (Nwachukwu,1988) as 'organizational effort aimed at helping an employee to acquire basic skills required for the efficient execution of the functions for which he was hired'. Librarians benefit from continuing education provided by work environment albeit, subconsciously.

Academic librarians in Nigerian schools are expected to crave for curricula reform in order to enhance professional services. This is due to the increase in the number of foreign students in our institutions and transformation in the society due to the application of information technology. It is pertinent for librarians and information scientists to develop the ability to provide varied information services for professional growth and development through in-service training. There is need for a librarian to have constant evaluation of himself in order to identify his area of weakness and make conscious effort for improvement by embarking on self-study and practical exposure

independent of an organization's contribution (Nkebem 2009:75)

A good example of in-service training is 'learning on the job'. It is the processes of making new employee to work alongside others in the workroom to enable acquire practical knowledge of all the theories already learnt through formal education. Learning on-the-job exposes employees to new experiences and techniques of performing the task. (Cooper and Payne, 1980 and Nkebem, 2009: 76) According to the authors, this is a more efficient way of motivating workers and getting their co-operation, support and high performance for the realization of institutional goals. (Aitken: 2004) defines in-service training as the ongoing training of practicing professionals, which is typically arranged by the boards that employ them.

There are provisions for training and retraining of all categories of staff in the annual budgets of all Colleges and Universities in the country through TETFUND and other internal arrangement. Librarians are also beneficiaries of this provision as they sometimes receive training for higher degrees under their Universities' and Colleges of Education in service training programmes. Library management should therefore encourage the staff to go for this training so as to increase their relevance in the library. The management should identify the area of need in the library, area where manpower is needed and recommend staff for training in such area. In-service training has many objectives, which include specific learning activities tailored to the development needs of library staff and the library.

The result of the research carried out by Nkebem (76) suggests that teachers who receive in-service training are likely to show better output towards their job than those who do not receive in-service training and that the more a teacher gets more experience in terms of new skills and knowledge acquired, the likelihood of such teacher showing a positive and favorable job performance. It is in recognition of this observation that Aboyade (1976) recommends that in order to promote continuing education of their staff, university librarians should take certain actions such as:

(a) Arranging to have regular professional

meetings or training sessions within their libraries;

(b) Sponsoring their staff for relevant courses whenever they are available;

(c) Granting periodic study leaves;

(d) Rewarding those who undertake further studies with promotion or an increment in salary, especially if they display superior or improved skills as a result of some further education.

Khan (2013:4) identifying various areas in the library that a library staff can get trained postulates that most of LIS researchers—working on continuing education (CE), professional development (PD) and trainings—are inclined towards focusing ICT to be the most demanding area for Librarians. No doubt it is demanding, but there are other areas also in which Librarians do require trainings, they include: Management & Leadership, Communication, Teaching & Trainings, Attitudinal Development, and Subject/domain knowledge. A lot of research according to Khan has been conducted on training needs for LIS professionals in Pakistan. (Bhatti, 2012) identified inadequate in-service training for library staff and suggested a national committee consisted on stakeholders for the improvement of the situation. (Ullah and Mahmood, 2012) Highlighted the roles and functions of libraries in research and argued that librarians must prepare for professional modern skills through appropriate trainings. (4).

Acquisition of French language for Proficiency in the Sustainability of Effective Library Services in the Nigerian Academic Libraries

In modern times, French is a significant diplomatic language: it is an official language of the United Nation, the Olympic Games and European Union. It is also the official language of 29 countries and it is spoken in France, Belgium, Switzerland, Luxemburg, Tunisia, Morocco, Senegal, Haiti, the Ivory Coast, Madagascar, the Congo, Algeria, Niger and Canada (mostly in the province of Quebec, where it is the primary language, but it is also used in other parts of the country). All consumer product packages in Canada are required by law to have both English and French labels). French language is spoken by more than 300 million people in 5 continents. It is the second most widely learned foreign language

after English, and the fifth most widely spoken language in the world.

Buttressing on the importance of French language proficiency among the Library staff (Offor and Kamaldeen) state that it is a necessary tool to be acquired by library personnel practicing within the enclaves of the Nigerian tertiary institution. This is because proficiency in French is one of the educational goals stated in the National Policy on Education (NPE 2004:10).

Furthermore as pointed out by Khan (2006), for the librarian to be able to offer effective services to its users, such a library personnel “must be well-read and well acquainted with the tools of his trade. He must have a full knowledge of the materials with which he has to deal with.” (p.89). proficiency therefore helps a librarian to meet up with the aforementioned qualities.

In continuation, (Offor and Kamaldeen) state that French language proficiency is therefore an imperative tool which library personnel in Nigeria tertiary institutions must acquire based on following importance:

- Proficiency in French language facilitates information accessing. It will also promote information and idea sharing with the francophone world; which will be of immense benefits to the academic institution in which the academic library is situated.
- It will enable the library staff to carry out tasks of disseminating information in French, selection and ordering of books with French language titles as well cataloguing these books without language hitches.
- French language proficiency also enhances communication between the public service personnel and students as well as staff of French departments. This hitch free communication will facilitate effective and user-friendly library services as the need of these users are met or attended to.
- Also, francophone students who are studying in Nigeria tertiary institutions could also use the academic libraries without any language barrier. This will go a long way in facilitating their studies and also encourage other francophone citizens to patronize our tertiary institutions; thereby accruing economic benefits to the country. (145).

There are several ways to learn French

language and use it effectively and fluently. It could be in an institution or on-line. Library staff, like every other worker who have interest in this language can develop their skills in several ways. We want to look at three ways in this research work.

a. Learning through acculturation

Acculturation is integration or assimilation of an individual or immigrants into a host community. It involves engagement with a wide range of new cultural practices of which language is a highly significant element. *Le dictionnaire Petit Larousse* defines ‘Acculturation’ as ‘processus par lequel un individu, un groupe social ou une société entre en contact avec une culture différente de la sienne et l’assimilie en partie’. (10). It is process by which an individual, a social group or a society comes into contact with a culture different from his own and partly assimilates it. (Our translation).

In this process, an adult undergoes second language learning in a natural environment under the conditions of immigration. Second language learning (2LL) in this context is viewed mainly in relation to the adaptation of the learner to the culture of target language (TL) community; rather than in terms of how linguistic and grammatical features are acquired. As Ellis (2008) has observed, for many years, the learning of another language has continued to pre-dominate language studies at all levels, including most research in second language acquisition (SLA). However, the natural environment and socio-cultural factors for the acquisition and use of the second language seem not to have been taken into adequate considerations. (Agnihotri *et al.*, 1998; Ellis, *op. cit.*) as cited by (Ahamefule, 2019 :1).

This is one of the best ways to learn a foreign language. Visiting the environment, community or the country where the language is spoken. In this case, the target language should be the major language of the environment. When asked which country is best to visit for acculturation? The answer is France. Although there are several other

countries as listed above where a learner can visit and learn. French is both the Mother Tongue(L1) and the official language of the people of France. It is generally spoken in the office, in the market, in schools and on the street. Opportunity to learn in these countries would enable the library staff to speak the language fluently.

In a research work carried out by (Ahamefule 2019) titled ‘The Acculturation Model in Second Language Learning: A Cross-Linguistic Study of a Group of English-Speaking Nigerian Immigrants Learning German as a Second Language in Germany’, he itemizes the benefits of acculturation programme and reasons for improving proficiency in foreign languages as follows: confidence and independence for the learners, ability to express feelings and opinions freely, getting or keeping a job, furtherance of education or training, understanding the way of life, that is, social rules of the host country and finally, ability to start a business.

Acculturation has great influence on individual or a group when it comes to acquiring a new language. It is one of the fastest means of learning a language due to its complex process. It results in an individual or a minority group modifying its social norms, attitudes, values and behaviours because of continuous exposure to another cultural system, which is significantly different from their original culture. When this happens, the individuals may relinquish or retain the characteristics of their culture of origin. In most instances, acculturation is presented in the direction of a minority group which adopts the habits and language pattern of the dominant or host society. (Berry and Sam, 1997; Maxwell, 1998).

b. Development of library staff in French language proficiency through online French lessons

Most people perceive French to be a difficult language to learn. While it is true that it poses certain difficulties to native English speakers, it may be noted that English is also considered ‘difficult’ to learn and yet we learn it without the benefit of already knowing a language. All we need to do as new learners is to master the simple stuff, take the elementary, which is the starting point seriously before moving onto the more

complex concepts. We can achieve this online even in the absence of a teacher. Several of such sites are available on google where a learner can log onto and learn. Available are also radio stations, television stations, radio and television programs that afford the opportunity to learn French. A library staff willing to improve his/her fluency in French language can also rent or buy French language movies (many American or and U.K. movies have a French language option). Pay attention to pronunciation. You might need to get hold of a French speaker you meet and talk to him or her in French. Listen, speak and practice. Read French newspapers and magazines, Google’s news page which links to French language news stories, is an excellent source that will enrich your vocabulary.

There are several Internet sites devoted to studying French in the FFL classroom. Lessons thought on these sites include vocabulary, grammar, sentences, idiomatic expressions, songs and several others. Other sites are devoted to video where a learner can select from a list of short movies having translation in English. Few examples of such are Youtube and Vidmate. When the teacher or the learner clicks on <https://www.lexiquefle.free.fr>, he/she can click buttons to discover French vocabulary in different subjects, such as the body, the family, numbers, animals, the train station, in the city, and my home. See (Erkan 2017:3).

c. By enrolling in a diploma or NCE program

In higher institutions in Nigeria, French language exists as a department. In Colleges of Education across the country, students offer French as a course and are offered NCE certificates after three years of study. It is also offered in Polytechnics and other institutions. Other options available are also the ‘Alliance Française’ in all the geo-political zones in Nigeria, where French language is thought in earnest. Diploma programs are offered to the participants at the end, this is after the students have been taken through rigorous curricular and extra-curricular activities. Library staff in these schools should be encouraged to register for French programs. This would enhance their spoken French and at the end improve their

services towards French learners in the school. Apart from the NCE and Diploma in French, library staff that has already got a diploma or 'A' level in areas related to French can be encouraged to pursue a degree in French.

Provision of e-library

One of the ways through which French learners can improve their competence in our higher institutions is through internet. The terms "electronic library," "virtual library" and "digital library" are used synonymously. An 'electronic library', according to Daniel (2012:1), is a collection of network digital information resources and associated technical and managerial infrastructure'. The electronic library is assumed to include data and metadata in various formats that are created or assembled in order to provide services to users. (Baro et al. 2013) describe the e-library as 'a library in which collections are stored in digital formats as opposed to print, microforms or other media. It can be accessed only through computers' (103). From these definitions, we agree that the electronic library is a resource with collections of information in digital forms,

School libraries should be equipped with internet facilities to aid students in their works. Most students depend on the library for their assignments and projects. Where materials to meet their academic needs are not available on shelves, students would have the option of going through the internet. This is where the role of e-library becomes very vital in our schools. The e-library is useful both to the librarian and the learners of French as foreign language. It is very useful in making the librarians and students to upgrade themselves and attain personal development in listening and oral competence of French language. This can be achieved through numerous videos and audios that are available on the internet.

The responsibility of serving French

learners in the library and the e-library in particular requires certain skills. These skills as itemized by (Buarki et al., 2011) and cited by (Baro et al. 2013:104) range from computer skills, knowledge of technologies, library automation and management software, online database searching, online cataloguing experience, information retrieval, word processing and desktop publishing skills, webpage design and maintenance skills. (104).

Conclusion

Lack of communication and healthy interaction between the library staff of academic library and learners of French in our various institutions of higher learning, especially among the francophone learners, has been identified as a key factor hampering effective and sustainable library services in Nigeria. As a result of this the performance of students are greatly affected due to their inability to maximum use of the resources available in the library. The French learner who is probably a francophone finds it difficult to locate where the materials he/she needs are located in the library the fact that the materials are either very few, old or archaic notwithstanding. The library staff that might be willing to assist is therefore unable to do so due to his/her inability to speak the French language. This paper therefore calls on the school management of our various institutions and the government to take proficiency in French language among the library staff of our academic libraries a major issue that requires serious attention. The researchers suggest among others that there should be Provision of e-library and in-service training for library staff. Library personnel should be trained on French language proficiency. This will help in closing up the gap between francophone learners in our higher institution and the library staff.

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