

## A CRITIQUE OF METHODS AND APPROACHES USED IN FRENCH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN NIGERIA COLLEGES/UNIVERSITIES

### Abstract

*The controversies that raged among modern linguists concerned the issue of which methods were more efficient at producing more or less agreed ends in language teaching and learning. At this background, the need to give a critical analysis of methods and approaches used in French language teaching in Nigerian Colleges and Universities became necessary. The choice of methods is predicted on what we know about a language as well as the people in their day to day interaction. Consequently Grammar/Translation, Direct method, Audio-Lingual method, Audio-visual method, Communicative Approach amongst others evolved with the passage of time and accompanied with texts and materials for implementation for example Pierre et Seydou Libre Echange Contact, Trans-Afrique, Tempo etc. The basic aim of learning a modern or foreign language is to effectively communicate in human related matters. Since all these methods are without their merits and demerits therefore a collective adaptability of these methods and strategies is proposed in the teaching of languages and should be thus appraised.*

### Introduction

The philosophy of language teaching is premised on the principle that man can hardly contemplate communal life without the instrument of language Fancelli (1975). The teaching and learning of French as a foreign language is implicitly justified by the foregoing. The world diplomatic contacts, regional economic ties and aspirations, sports and socio cultural activities remain causal factors for bringing African nations closer. Hence the indices for teaching French language in the Anglophone countries and English language in the Francophone zones Fadiran, (1979). The need for Nigerians to communicate with their French-Speaking neighbours especially in sub-region organisation like the ECOWAS are additional factors. Furthermore, as Rivers (1968) affirms, other stated aims of foreign language teaching are:

- a) To develop the learner's intellectual competence through foreign-language study;
- b) To increase the learner's understanding of how language functions and to bring the learner through the study of foreign languages to a greater awareness of the functioning of his own language.
- c) To provide learners with skills which will enable them communicate orally or in written form with the speakers of other nationalities that have learnt this language;
- d) To teach the learners to read the foreign language with comprehension, keeping abreast with modern information, bringing learners to a greater understanding of people, across national barriers.

The objectives in the syllabus content for teaching French in the institutions are in line with Roberts, (1992) specifications. The most vital are: speaking, reading, understanding, writing, grammar, translation, acquaintance with history and civilization as well as literature of

foreign peoples, better understanding, mental discipline, social adaptability and the use of foreign discoveries.

The realisation of these objectives will be to enable learners to communicate. This is explicit in Chukwu's (1975) expression "Pourquoi apprendre la langue française, c'est pour permettre aux apprenants d'exprimer leur propre réalité et comprendre la réalité exprimée par des gens d'autres pays.p.14

While aims and objectives are inter-related, Bryne (1980) would for practical usefulness reserve the term "aims" for long-term goals such as to provide for justification for the teachings of second or third language and "objective" for shorter goals as may reasonably be achieved in a classroom lesson or sequence of lessons . Through sort-term realistic goals, the essential purpose for teaching French may be achieved.

The means or a channel through which the goals or objectives for teaching French may be realised remains the major issue. The purpose of this paper is therefore to give a critical evaluation of the methods and approaches commonly used with a view to, eventually, present a balanced mixture of methods for teaching French language in Nigeria Colleges/Universities.

### **A Panaroma of Common Methods Used in Nigrian Colleges of Education / Universities**

According to Rivers (1972), the choice of methods is predicted on what we know about a language and what we know about the people in their day-to-day interaction. Inevitably, therefore, the methodological recommendation will vary depending on the knowledge of such factors. In the bid to react to such factors that society or language is dynamic, methods consequently evolved from the grammatical–translation method to the more recent communicative approach. Teachers should keep abreast of findings in these areas and share the excitement of the development and progress in language teaching.

#### ***Grammar / Translation***

Folio (2000) states that traditional method of modern language teaching drew from the teaching of ancient languages (Latin and Greek), and it was based on the grammar/translation method used in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Williams (1990) spelt out these activities as typical of the method.

- rote-memorization of vocabulary items with native language equivalents;
- reading aloud in the foreign language of literary selections in the texts;
- translation of texts and explicit explanation on grammar rules;
- lack of attention paid to communicative content.

The present day evaluation of this method is largely negative, though used by teachers . While the method may be in certain cases useful and economical, the emphasis that the oral precedes the written form of language is relegated to the background. The learners find it difficult to communicate orally. This impediment necessitated the birth of another method – the direct method.

### *Direct Method*

David (1975) contends that content limitation dictated the need for direct method. Willaim (1990) describes the method as a natural method, which at the other extreme ruled out translation and the use of mother tongue in a foreign language teaching. On the contrary, oral activity is promoted and assisted by use of actions, gestures, miming, pictures, dialogues, diagrams, etc. The learners are immersed in the sound and the culture of the target language. Though the learners' participation is high, the method can be distorted such that sometimes the learners do not have a clear idea of what to do.

It may also be ironical or unrealistic to think that the classroom learning of a foreign language can be brought about through a process that is identical with the mother tongue. Therefore the natural process needs to be assisted form time to time by explanations and appropriate actions. The method emphasises teaching the language in the language directly without any intermediary language. It is sad to note that many higher institutions (colleges of education and universities) alike still run some courses on French literature and civilisation being conducted in English. Eventually the graduating teachers still find it difficult to speak French even after three or four years of the language study.

### *Audio-Lingual Method*

Bryne (1990) and Williams (1990) described this method as that which emphasises aural and oral skills. As the name implies, listening and speaking are the primary skills. This method relies heavily on the use of dialogues (intensive oral drills or pattern practice). There is a high level of participation by the learners who are encouraged to speak with minimum errors.

In spite of this, the review of this method shows that there is a tendency to focus on discrete items in isolation. Similarly, this method also exposes the presence of skills not representing the language used for real life communication. Besides, there is undue emphasis on the aural aspect to the detriment of those who are visual method. Furthermore there is unrealistic emphasis on error-free learning. It should, however, be borne in mind that mistakes to be corrected from part of language learning process.

### *Audio-Visual Method*

In a critique of the former audio – oral, Folio (2000) described the audio-visual as the joint use of image and sound. One of the main principles of the audio-visual method is that one learns a modern language by experiencing it. The method emphasises learner's participation at every stage as the basis for the success. The learner identifies with the speaker on the screen. The image is used as an auxiliary to refer to the contents of the dialogue, which elucidates the message for the learners. The social demands or oral practice of modern foreign languages obviously suggest that the dialogue approach should systematically replace former literary approach made up texts. Towards the 1970s linguists started giving the audio – visual method a new orientation since it was unable to cater for communication in social affairs and relations. They put forward ideas that prepared the way for a new methodological approach, known as the communicative approach.

### ***Communicative Approach***

Brumfit (1968) and Williams (1990) opine that the communicative method is based on and also responds to the learners' often changing communicative needs and interest. The communicative method teaches learners how to communicate effectively in a foreign language. The major concern for communicative language teaching refers to appropriateness of conventional, transactional, and interactional usage of language. It makes learners communicate in real life situations as they learn to ask for information or advice, introduce themselves in real life situations; introduce themselves to others and greet a visitor among other activities. The overall situation is highlighted by Zhenhui (1999): "the communicative approach is in many ways a commitment to eclecticism in practice that cannot be otherwise". The technique is more of learner-centred teaching, less teacher-talk, less repetition, emphasis on meaning, as well as social and pragmatic aspects of communication.

### **A Review of Common Programmes and Approaches Used in Colleges/Universities**

Several methods or techniques have been evolved in the teaching of French as a foreign language. Here is a critical analysis of an inexhaustive list of these methods.

*De Vive Voix*, an audio-visual-aural approach not created to replace "Voix image de France" but to act as a complement to it. It has been used for many years. *De Vive Voix* is principally addressed to both adults and adolescent beginners of French.

This method introduced Mireille (a young lady) and Pierre (a young man) as principal actors initiating a friendly relationship. The method is a package of recorded tapes, series of coloured filmstrips, teachers guide, practice spelling book and student copy. The lessons are presented through repetition, explanation and transposition. The learners are able to watch the picture in the film, as well as listen to the dialogues through the cassette. The learners participate in the beginning to the end as they undergo role-plays through dialogues, demonstrations and dramatisation. The story is quite simple to follow as it has a setting and lively characters.

Despite the interesting didactic qualities, *De Vive Voix* is not a complete model. The model is culturally too European/French based. Hence there isn't much to teach but to concentrate more on French civilisation right from the first lessons. Several episodes of the programmes are so culture specific that even an experienced teacher will find it difficult to adopt them to Nigerian situations. For example, "le repas" may barely be adapted to African episode. There are evidently flaws in the design of the lessons particularly lesson seven where the lesson is full of repetition and therefore boring. In spite of these shortcomings, the method can prove successful where it is properly adapted to the local situation.

### ***Bonne Route***

"Il n'y a pas de mauvais livres, il n'y a que mauvais maîtres". The statement may only be partly true. There are, unfortunately, bad books and good teachers or both are good or otherwise bad. "Bonne route" has no extremes. The programme has also addressed practical realistic issues in language teaching experience. *Bonne Route* volumes 1 and 2 are addressed to both adults and adolescent beginners of French. The diverse teaching situations referring to

culture; habits of learning, language perception, classroom practicals and frequency are interesting.

The aim of the method is to let learners acquire basic and systematic grammar as well as useful vocabulary to enable them express themselves in real life situations. The texts accompanied with cassettes are essential materials for oral practice, comprehension and grammar. The pictures, drawings and short poems as well as the short passages for dictation and comprehension all contribute to make the programme complete. Much as this method is basic, simple and practical, the elements to be passed across to the learners require the teacher's prudence. This is even more so since one of the aims of this programme is to prepare students to pass the elementary/proficiency French course with Alliance Française. The situation in the colleges is however, quite different. The students are rather being prepared for the Nigerian Certificate in Education, a fairly advanced diploma. The methods require much more care in application at this level. However, the method carefully employed is quite useful for the preliminary programmes in both colleges and universities. The text tilts overtly towards French civilization, for the situation and the names selected are too typically, French, in this regard, adoption to the local context may be necessary.

### *Libre Echange*

Libre Echange produced by Courtilon and Sabre (1991) has two volumes. Libre Echange for both functional and communicative reasons is also meant for secondary schools, colleges and universities as well as adult learners. Quite a number of expressions are recorded with diverse communicative situations. The learners are sensitised to listen to the record functional expressions in form of speech acts. Activities for role play are inserted, other activities for the learners include grammar, discovering and appropriating rules of grammar, phonetic expressions comprehension and other areas of culture and civilization are highlighted. However, Libre Echange seems not to be designed for Anglophone learners of French, it is suitable for the Francophone learners of French. The culture bias is overtly evident. For example, the reference to "Bourgogne" explains the centre of "religious movement/and "art cistercien" associated with ideal monastic purity. Libre Echange can be adapted to meet the needs of Nigerian learners but comprehension may be difficult.

### *Entrée Libre*

Entrée Libre, produced by Care, Odot and Santomauro (1987), is designed for both youths and adults of all nationalities of average level in the French language. It is essentially prepared in line with situational functions that help the learners to appropriate the language as a means of communication. Gradually the learners acquire linguistic elements relevant to each given situation. The activities are meant to develop both oral and written comprehension as well as oral and written expression. Entrée Libre II contains the variety of texts covering a chat (shopping), projets (projects), voyage (travelling), employ (employment), détente (leisure/rest), santé (health), bureau (office), etc. Many cassettes are of added advantage to the learner's faster comprehension.

The language style is however too high for the average Nigerian learners even in the universities. What applies to Libre Echange and France en Direct also applies to Entrée Libre.

The all seem to lay emphasis on French civilization and literature. Nigerian teachers can only derive maximum benefit from this programme by extensively adapting to the local situation, i.e. the learners' social background level of comprehension.

### *Pierre et Seydou*

*Pierre et Seydou* covers three stages each having pupils book and teacher's guide accompanied with a cassette. In the case of stage 3, it is accompanied with flannel graph materials. This programme was widely used in secondary schools throughout West Africa. In Nigeria, some Colleges of education and Universities adopted the method in the 80s.

Stage one and two emphasise the use of dialogues and listening skills while stage 3 concentrates on developing reading and writing skills without much use of visual aids. Five dossiers included in these stage are: l'enseignement, les métiers, la tradition, le mondernisme, la medicine and le Togo. These are followed by grammatical and creative writing exercises related to the learner's experience. There is little difficulty in making learners identify with the main characters in the programmes as they are both youths. *Pierre et Seydou* has much to offer yet it is far from being complete. The initial dialogues though quite simple are stereo typed and they be termed as "straight jacket"

Type of conversation for example:

- Pierre est ici?
- Oui, il est ici.
- Il travaille?
- Non, il lit journal.

Also, stage 3 accompanied by flannel graph is costly and not easily acquired. The use of silhouettes requires much diligence and because it can be boring. Even though the method is hardly in use nowadays in schools' yet many parts of the method remain quite interesting.

*Contact and Transafrique* are similar. They are quite simple and can be used fort the beginners in secondary schools or the Pre-NCE as well as Pre-degree Programmes. *Contact*, like *Transafrique*, uses English at the instruction stage for easy comprehension. *Contact* is also comprehensive for children learning French. However, while *Contact* is accompanied with a cassette, it is not so for *Transafrique*.

### *Tempo*

*Tempo* is a recent method and has been found to be useful in both colleges and universities. The method divided into units is innovative, constructive, practical and easy to use. The objectives of the lessons are quite pragmatic. The method literally covers the major aspects of language communication skills. The language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are also well adapted to meet DELF/DALF requirements.

All these methods and others are important in the teaching and learning of French Language. The adaptability and profitability will now depend on the individuals and institutions.

While some proper names are adopted to fit into Nigerian local environment and culture, other expressions are explained in the target language. The adaptation is not an end but a means to an end and teachers require care and guidance to effectively use these course books.

### Availability And Adaptability Of The Methods

It is pertinent to ask, how many of these methods are being used in the Colleges of Education/Universities today? The acquisition of the basic texts and necessary equipment for the teaching of French has for long been a problem, particularly when there is a shift of emphasis due to political or religious considerations. Very often little attention may be paid to be a question of lack of materials for French language teaching. While some colleges may boast of having the latest methods of teaching French as a foreign language, others hardly have any equipment for teaching French, the same applies to universities. The imbalance in this regard may presuppose an imbalance of the quality of products across the institutions of higher learning.

Teachers have complained that some of the methods are too foreign to their environment and therefore adaptation becomes necessary. The adaptation sometimes included in certain cases is in such aspects as transport, especially the "Paris underground" Much as it will be expedient to include indigenous names of fruits, food, trees and animals, writers should however bear in mind that "leopard with different spots is still a leopard" David (1975) remarked, " a mediocre European course book does not become a good African simply by talking of mangoes as opposed to apples or showing a palm tree or crocodile on its glossy cover. Perhaps the device of authors making use of Nigerian characters making them speak French better may be artificial, David (1975) further affirmed. However, the creativity and originality in the course books might give room for authentic tasks and performance with the learners. The issue of adaptability should be that which does not change the aim of the learning of French either spoken or written.

### Pedagogical Implications

The teaching of the target language is not just to get the learner over an important educational hurdle but to enable them participate to some degree as members of a community other than their own. This also implies the different linguistic features in the skills of speaking, reading, listening comprehension and writing. The decision taken in the field of methods implies adopting new language as a phenomenon of individual psychology. Bryne (1990) argued further that what characterized the so-called traditional method of language teaching was not so much that it lacked an awareness of the psychological dimension of language to have limited the range of skills. The skills which the method attempted to develop were those, which the society thought appropriate at the time. This may be true of other methods. David (1990) also argued that proponents of the direct method advocated total immersion in the target language instructed or guided immersion in which learners devise their own learning strategies. It is soon forgotten that time is needed for learning to take place and it should not be a matter of trial and error. The search for the appropriate method led to the finding of the orchestrated communicative approach. Bonne Route, De Vive Voix, Libre Echange, France en Direct, Pierre et Seydou, Studio and Tempo have all borrowed from the traditional method, direct method, audio-lingual or communicative approach in their principles for language teaching / learning.

While many of the methods are written directly in French, Contact and Transafrique are written with instruction to exercises in English. They lean towards grammar translation, though the communicative aspects are not left out in these course books.

Libre Echange as well as Entrée Libre have much to offer concerning literature, civilization and culture; they tend to emphasise what traditional method seems to lay emphasis on, in terms of written language culture. In spite of that, there are traces of communicative elements in these methods. While language teachers are neither literature nor culture teachers, per se, some have fallen 'prey' to excessive emphasis on literature to the detriment of other aspects. Elements of literature can also be employed or applied as basic for teaching language.

Having seen that the techniques adopted in each of these methods or approaches are multifaceted, having to borrow from different methods; it will be palpable to see these methods as viable depending on the skill the language teacher wishes to emphasise on. A comparative study of the effect of video instructional television and traditional methods on students' attitudes and achievement in language learning carried out by Ojogun (1997) indicated that there was no significant difference on text achievement. No method is superior to the other for all methods have their relative importance.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Brumfit (1986) commenting that the purpose of learning modern foreign language is to communicate with those who speak it is no new insight because even the "most traditional language teachers also regarded communication as their ultimate" The controversies that raged among modern linguists essentially concerned the question of which methods were more efficient at producing more or less agreed ends. It was supposed that someone who has a mastery of the structure of the language and a supply of vocabulary would be able to use it for the purpose of communication. What remains therefore is the basic skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing which should be developed in the learning process. Folio (2000) emphasised that the four skills have to be practised. From traditional to communicative method or from "De Vive Voix" to "Dites moi tout", what is required is the competence in the various facets of language acquisition. Methods are relative and complementary. From the foregoing, it is pertinent to conclude that whatever methods, approaches or techniques the teacher adopts, the essence is to make the teaching dynamic, realistic and interesting. And to make such lesson real, teaching aids are necessarily to be employed for it is commonly accepted that visual aids are an ideal shortcut between the concept and its expression in the foreign languages learning, that's avoiding undue translation. Emphasis here is therefore on pure amalgamation of these various methods, picking the appropriate technique at a time and adopting such for effective teaching of French. The teacher therefore should endeavour to make provision and also to improvise where and when necessary. The motivation and zeal of both learners and the teachers may be further sustained through scholarship and grants and before long the teaching of the target language may become more meaningful.



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