An Assessment of Difficulties in French as a Second Language and Dependable Solution to a Native English Speaker

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ABSTRACT

This study was to sought out the difficulty in French as a second language and dependable solution to a native English speaker. Although second-language acquisition literally refers to learning a language after having acquired a first language, the term is frequently used to refer to the acquisition of a second language after a person has reached puberty. People experience little difficulty in acquiring more than one language. Contrary to popular belief, the French language is one of the easiest and most useful languages for a native English speaker to learn. The main aim of this article is to discuss some obvious difficulties involved in learning French for a native English speaker, proffer possible solution to the challenges encountered in the learning of French as a second language especially by native English speakers and also highlight the importance of French language as a means of communication. From the study is was concluded that a Native English speaker learning French as a second language must encounter a series of challenges when speaking French. It is therefore recommended that Native English speaker learning French as a second language should consistently practice the remedies outlined in order to have an improvement.

KEYWORDS: English speaker, native speaker, second language, verb conjugation.

Introduction

Learning to speak and understand a language is one of the most complex types of learning, however, it is believed that humans have the ability to speak and understand more than one language (Sapir, 1980). There is a widespread perception that French language is difficult to learn compared to other European languages. The French language is one of the most spoken Romance languages used by most countries as a language of instruction. This perception has discouraged some people who are enthusiastic about learning French language. Although, learning a second language comes with some difficulties which are not

insurmountable if appropriate measures are taken to address these challenges at the early stage.

For a native English speaker, there exist some factors that determine the individual's ability to learn and the speed of learning. Studying French enriches the English vocabulary of the Anglophone student in immeasurable ways and in many domains. This article seeks to discuss the difficulties in learning French for a native English speaker and also highlight the importance of French language. This study proffers possible solutions to the different levels of challenges that native English speakers encounter while learning French as a second language.

Components of Language

Spoken human language is composed of sounds that do not in themselves have meaning, but that can be combined with other sounds to create entities that do have meaning. Thus p, e, and n do not in themselves have any meaning, but the combination pen does have a meaning (Comrie, 2009). Furthermore, language also is characterized by complex syntax whereby elements, usually words, are combined into more complex constructions, called phrases, and these constructions play a major role in sentence structure. A general characteristic of language is that words are not directly combined into sentences; rather, they are combined into intermediate units, called phrases, from which sentences are formed.

Second-Language Acquisition

Language acquisition is the process by which children and adults learn a language or languages (Comrie, 2009). People learn second languages more successfully when they become immersed in the cultures of the communities that speak those languages. People also learn second languages more successfully in cultures in which acquiring a second language is expected, as in most African countries, than they do in cultures in which second-language proficiency is considered unusual, as in most English-speaking countries.

Worthy of note is the fact that, people must expend greater effort in order to learn a second language and they often achieve lower levels of competence in that language as compared to the first. Theories of second language acquisition have claimed that language input has a consistent positive effect in improving proficiency. These theories maintain that the input has to be comprehensible to the learner and modified through interactions. In vocabulary acquisition, the Input Hypothesis has inspired studies of incidental vocabulary learning through reading and listening and analysis of teacher's talk as oral input.

Although bilingualism is relatively rare among native English speakers, in many parts of the world, it is the standard rather than the exception. For example, more than half the population of Papua New Guinea is functionally competent in both an indigenous language and Tok Pisin (Dinneen and Francis, 1995). People in many parts of the country have mastered two or more indigenous languages. According to Comrie Bernard (2009), bilingualism often involves different degrees of competence in the languages involved. A person may control one language better than another, or a person might have mastered the different languages better for different purposes, for example, using one language for speaking, and another for writing.

Learning French as a Second Language

Undoubtedly in Nigeria, French teachers are difficult to come by unlike in other fields of study. According to Oluranti (2012), most of the teachers available are not trained to teach

the French language. Since teachers are very vital to the implementation of any curriculum, their preparation should be considered essential in any meaningful educational implementation strategy. It is the teacher who interprets the objectives and contents in the curriculum plans and manages the learning situation; hence, their quality, quantity, willingness, self-motivation, interest, commitment and use of methodology are very essential for the success of the programme.

Why then does the notion that French is hard to learn persist? Why, in particular, is it generally considered to be harder to learn than Spanish? The linguistic response for English speakers is that, French is no more difficult to learn to speak than to Spanish. The misperception regarding the difficulty of French likely arises from two sources. First, French has historically been regarded as the language of high European culture and this association leads to the faulty assumption that the language of this culture must be more complex and difficult than other European languages. Second, like English, the spelling system of French can take some time to learn.

However, there are real advantages for the English speaker in learning French spelling as it actually helps foster correct spelling habits in English. French borrowings in English, such as bureau, cuisine, architecture, ballet, menagerie, restaurant, trompe l'oeil, often retain their etymological spelling and this gives the French student a striking advantage in all areas where spelling matters, from writing essays and job application letters to competing in a spelling bee. In reality, the reputation of French as a difficult language could be easily recast as the very reason for studying it in high school.

Some Identified Challenges of Learning French for a Native English Speaker

It is a general belief that French is difficult to learn as compared to other European languages such as Spanish is easy. There exist different stages of difficulties in the language learning process. These challenges are divided into two main aspects; learner problem (Pronunciation, Spelling, Stress and rhythm of speech, Gender, Verbal complements, The Use of the Imperfect Tense, and Verb Conjugation) and lack of textual materials.

Learner Problems

According to Barbara (2010), a Nigerian child learning French language has a lot of problems to cope with. There is the problem of mother tongue interference to the second language. The child first thinks in his mother tongue before translating it into the second language which is the English language, finally he has to re-translate his thoughts from the English language to the French language. This adds to the child's inability to learn the language effectively. The child needs a patient and dedicated teacher who will help him overcome all his language defects. Below are some identified learner problems:

Problem Associated with Pronunciation

When asked, what is the hardest thing in learning French language? Most people agree learning French pronunciation is the most difficulty. First, unfamiliar spelling conventions pose a problem. French has a number of sounds that does not exist in English language. For instance, there are the nasal vowel sounds, which you might recognize in French speech. Also, letters "R" and "U" take on modulated pronunciations. Describing them in text is not really effective. The French "R" sound is produced in a way dramatically different from English. These challenges are not unique to French language (Oluranti, 2012). Spanish offers many of these same difficulties, as does English for non-native speakers. French has some

vowels, such as the phonetic [y] found in the words tu, pure, dure etc. which do not exist in English. It is difficult, then, but not impossible for English speakers to learn to consistently make the distinction between pairs of words like tu~tout and pure~pour. However, the dissimilarity between these sounds across languages actually aids the learner in keeping the "R" of French distinct from that of English.

The difficulty can be solved by some practices such as recording yourself while speaking French language so as to spot out your weaknesses and mistakes in pronunciations. Having a frequent conversation with a native French speaker will go a very long way in boosting one's pronunciation skills and also consistent pronunciation practice of individual sounds is deeply helpful.

Problem Associated with Spelling

Spelling French words are quite a difficult challenge to overcome. This is because for a native English speaker, the French pronunciations may appear to be totally different from their spellings. For instance, the phrase pronounced "seel voo play" (French for "please," or literally "if it pleases you"), it's going to take some practice to remember that it's spelled S'il vous plait (Oluranti, 2012). A huge number of French words and phrases have spellings that don't really seem to match their pronunciations. This is one of the main differences between French and English. However, French is perhaps a bit easier than English, because there is more consistency. Things might be spelled oddly in French, but at least they are always spelled and pronounced with the same oddness. It's just a matter of memorizing a few new spellings. Like English, the spelling conventions of French were established during a time when the pronunciation of the language was still very much in flux. This makes the spelling system of modern French somewhat difficult for a beginner to acquire. For example, although the word eau is spelled with three letters, it is pronounced as an open vowel [o]. However, unlike English, the mapping between spelling and pronunciation in French is still very consistent. Students can, with time easily master the mapping from letter combinations to sounds and, as stated above, this may provide them insights into English spelling conventions.

Pay careful attention to what you are writing. Look carefully at endings that sound the same to make sure you are not writing down the first spelling of a sound that pops into your head. Remember that although each letter of a French word may not be pronounced, letters normally do have some kind of function, whether this means being part of a group of letters that represent a single phoneme or indicating that the preceding letter should be pronounced, as is the case with an e following a consonant. Remember that while you may not consider French spelling to be the most straightforward in the world, it is pretty consistent and once you become familiar with the sounds represented by the letters you read, you will be able to read a page of French text with 90% accuracy, even if it is filled with words you have never seen or heard before.

Problem Associated with Stress and rhythm of speech

This falls along the same lines as pronunciation, however, it is quite different from making the correct pronunciation. In English, there exists large number of stressed syllables in a phrase, often at least one in each word. In French, however, fewer stresses are used and, in many cases, unstressed syllables can be greatly deemphasized or even omitted altogether. This can create complex contractions that flow quickly and smoothly. Barbara (2010) insists that, the difference between these contractions and English contractions is that in French many contractions are mandatory. Take the phrase s'il vous plaît. "S'il" is actually a

contraction of si and il, meaning "if it." However, it would be incorrect to write, "si il vous plaît." The stress systems of English and French differ. There is only one prominent syllable in French language that normally comes at the end of a phrase. In English language, all major words contain one or more stressed syllables. Those that are not stressed can be reduced or deleted. Thus, the word university in English has a pattern of alternating strong and weak syllables ('ùnivérsity') whereas its cognate in French, université, maintains equal prominence on all syllables.

Frequent listening and speaking of French language will improve the learners' ability to know stress and rhythm, numbers of syllables in a word. Quite seen that some French words that consist of two syllables is spoken and pronounced as one syllable, such words have to be noted in pronunciation and spelling. Learners have to be able not to make the second language (French) to contrast with the universal language (English).

Problem Associated with Gender

Understanding the concept of "gender" is usually challenging for English speakers to grasp since English doesn't assign gender (masculine or feminine) to words. This is not unique to French, because some European languages such as Spanish, Italian, among others assign gender to words. Knowing the gender of a noun in French is important to using the correct articles (a, an, the) for the gender of the word, as well as choosing the correct adjective form. While there are some cues to figure out the gender of a word, in general it's just a matter of memorization.

The gender system of French is notoriously difficult for an Anglophone to acquire since there is no foolproof way to know the gender of a word. While there are some clues to selecting the gender of a word (for example, all words ending in –tion and nearly all of those ending in –té are feminine), it is still best to learn and teach noun vocabulary in a context where the gender is clear (for example, une fleur blanche rather than merely fleur.) On the other hand, native speakers of French are very tolerant when they hear gender (or gender agreement) errors from foreigners and such errors rarely pose an obstacle to effective communication.

For those who are already familiar with languages that use gender as a way to classify certain words, difficulties that are specific to the French language involve a weaker set of cues that indicate the gender of a particular noun. Compared to Spanish and Italian, which tend to use a endings for feminine nouns, French has a lot less to go by. Feminine French nouns include: chaise, dent, fenêtre, fleur, onde, orchidée, maison, and pitié, not to mention words such as amours, which is feminine in the plural form but masculine in the singular form. Learning the gender of each word can seem like a huge task to undertake.

Learn new words along with a singular indefinite article, une or un, since singular definite articles elide and plural articles look the same for feminine and masculine words. Remember nouns with adjectives that change form according to gender, e.g. joyeuse, joyeux rather than incroyable. Examples of such combinations include: belle musique, scènes émouvantes, grands sauts, danse joyeuse. It can also be useful to remember certain endings that are normally used for a particular gender, which I cover in another article.

Problem Associated with Verbal Complements

Experts in French language teaching are of the opinion that Verbs that require a preposition before an object or another phrase pose some challenges to learners - for instance, se souvenir de, se rappeler de, être content (e) de/avec- because the preposition does not carry any

meaning for them. In Barbara's (2010) view, learners should be made aware, though, that similar problems exist for second language learners of English since, for instance, the choice of preposition in expressions like happy about, proud of, pleased with is also simply automatic.

Problem Associated with the Use of the Imperfect Tense

This totally constitutes a stumbling block for French language learners. While French expresses the imperfect tense of a verb by a verbal ending, English expresses the imperfect through various means (I used to [do], I would [do], I always [did]). Thus, there is no direct map between a single English verb form and the French imperfect. The acquisition of the imperfect, then, usually takes some time in any Romance language because in English the imperfect is a property of the whole sentence rather than a property of the verb.

The passé composé and imparfait tenses seem to confuse learners the most, at least if they are not familiar with Romance languages. These two tenses occur simultaneously on a timeline, so you will have to figure out when to use what. As their uses do depend to a certain degree on context, they are less formulaic than some other aspects of French grammar (in function, if not form), which can be challenging for those who appreciate the extensive codification French grammar has undergone, making even the smallest minutiae of the language fall under some kind of logic.

For the passé composé / imparfait, learn what type of situation each is used for, e.g., "J'ai vu un film d'horreur la semaine dernière" vs. "J'avais peur de tous ces zombies". Know the characteristics of these sentences – a past action with a clear time duration and a past action with an unspecified time duration – while also getting used to patterns in speech.

Problem Associated with Verb Conjugation

It could be said that, there is a huge difference in the conjugation of verbs in French and in English especially in written form. The challenge with verb forms is mainly in the written language. In spoken French, where the present, the passé composé, the imperfect and the futur proche dominate in conversation, many of the verbal endings (final –t or –s) are actually silent. The highly irregular verbs –être, avoir, faire, aller– are so frequently used that their forms are fairly quickly memorized. Apart from these, the regular verbs (in –er), which poses no difficulty for learners, dominate among all verbal types. Oral French does not employ the simple past, thus there is one less paradigm that learners of French must master.

To alleviate the problem of verb conjugation by learners, effective study of the regular and irregular verb and where they can be used in sentence making. Just to take for example regular verb endings like –er, -ir, and –re can be used in words like regarder (to look), finir (to finish) and attendre (to wait), frequent practices and studying these conjugations and how to use them not exempting their pronunciation will find it easy to solve the issue of verb conjugation when speaking French.

Problem Associated with lack of materials

Non-availability of textbooks hinders the effective learning of a language. A learner may find learning difficult where there is lack of textbooks and audio-visual aids.

Most learners see learning a second language as challenging given that the language material is not in line with the French curriculum objectives which states that the child must be able to discuss intelligently about his immediate environment. The knowledge of the immediate environment is necessary in order to make a comparison between his own environment and that of the language he is learning. According to Stern (1984), researchers have shown that students learn language better if the textbooks portray their culture and civilization. Teaching a foreign language is concerned with the education of that country.

Materials like textbooks containing the culture of French countries will be very useful in helping the French language learners. Institutions teaching students French language should also do well to provide all materials that can at least help the learners positively, such materials like video files, audio files, software programmes and so on. If these materials are provided for the learners, the learning process will become easier and effective.

The Importance of French Language

In Nigeria, the French language is a foreign language. Since Nigeria is surrounded by French speaking countries (Chad, Benin Republic, Niger and "bilingual" Cameroon), the importance of the language in Nigeria for social, political, economics and international relations cannot be overemphasized. The use of language is to facilitate communication, to promote understanding between language originator and language recipient, and to enable useful, appropriate and efficient action to take place (Moody, 1970).

Studying French enriches the English vocabulary of the Anglophone student in immeasurable ways and in many domains that are part and parcel of everyday life. The legal and administrative vocabulary of English is stocked with French words: people, govern, chancellor, country, conference, council, judge, jury, suit, verdict, contract, guarantee, crime, treason, felony, ward, regal, royal, majesty all hail from French. The field of architecture abounds with French terms: mason, carpenter, scaffold, choir, chapel, belfry, even gargoyle. Household terms were transported directly from French: table, chair, cushion, chimney, laundry, garden, arbor, and specially into the kitchen: dinner, supper, dessert, flavor, sausage, pastry, tart, pork, mince, purée, sauté, butter, mush room, veal, beef, bacon, mutton, and so on.

Students wishing to expand their ability to work abroad in the Americas and, certainly, in Africa would do well to study French. And those seeking to work in international humanitarian efforts are served well by French, the official language of Amnesty International, The World Health Organization, The United Nations, The International Olympic Committee, the Red Cross, and Doctors without Borders, among others.

In sum, a very large percentage of the words in English and French have a common and easily identified source. The richest source of learned (academic) vocabulary in English actually derives not directly from Latin, but from French. For instance, Latin fragilis entered English through French, first as frail (from French frêle) then later, as fragile, a word the modern languages now share as a cognate. Even those words that may have entered English from Latin by a more direct route, such as ascend, are also found in one form or another in French: ascenseur. Thus, the classical word roots of Latin can be acquired by the English-speaking student via French, a living language!

Recent borrowings in English include au jus, soupçon, je ne sais quoi, frisson while anglicisms in spoken French continue to multiply unabated: email, babysitter, parking,

pompom girl, even from the domain of text messaging, (e.g., lol =Laughing Out Loud, pronounced lolle in French)

Conclusion

This article discussed the concept of second language acquisition and learning French as a second language. It also discussed extensively the various challenges which English native speakers are likely to encounter in learning French as a second language. In spite of these challenges, the English native speaker has numerous advantages when learning French aside from the social, educational, professional, and even cognitive advantages conferred upon a student who is bilingual in any language.

Recommendations

It is very important that Nigeria should study French language for international mutual understanding and cooperation. It is also essential for socio-economic and technological development of both Anglophone and the Francophone neighbours. French language educationists should be invited to prepare textbooks for the students' integration of their learning experiences and their everyday activities.

The problems identified perhaps give a ray of hope in terms of the implementation of French language learning curriculum provided the challenges as earlier identified are properly addressed. This will enable learners to attain mastery of the language. Surely, this would give brighter future prospects for the learning of French language especially as it concerns native English speakers.

Drills and constant practice are means of overcoming linguistic problems such as pronunciation, spelling, Stress and rhythm of speech, gender, verbal complements, the use of the imperfect tense, verb conjugation and mother tongue or first language interference. If emphasis is laid on drills and practice it would facilitate the future learning of French language!

In order to alleviate the problem of lack of language learning materials, it is advisable that in every French language training institution in the country, efforts should be geared towards providing enough materials. This is because the effective mastery of language depends on it. If there are enough qualified French teachers, it may help to boost learners' interest. Modern language teaching aids such as video films, tape recorders, films and projectors should be provided along with modern language laboratory so as to encourage the learning of French language.

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