



OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES OF INTERFERENCE IN THE LEARNING OF FRENCH LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The learning of French in Nigeria is often shaped by the multilingual background of learners who already speak one indigenous language and English before encountering French in School. This linguistic diversity, while culturally enriching, creates conditions for language interference, where elements of previously acquired languages influence the acquisition of French. Such interference manifests in pronunciation errors, grammatical inconsistencies, lexical transfer, and inappropriate sentence structures. This paper examines the nature and sources of interference in the learning of French in Nigeria and explores practical strategies for minimizing its impacts. Drawing on classroom realities and prevailing language teaching practices, the study highlights the roles of teachers, learners and educational institutions in addressing these challenges. It argues that with targeted pedagogical approaches, increased exposure to authentic French input, and improved instructional support, interference can be transformed from a barrier into a manageable stage in second language development. Ultimately, overcoming interference is essential for improving communicative competence and strengthening Nigeria's engagement with the francophone world.

Keywords: Interference, French, Challenges, Learning

Introduction

Nigeria is a multilingual nation where most students grow up speaking at least one indigenous language alongside English, the official language of education and administration. Within this complex linguistic environment, French occupies a significant position as an important foreign language and a tool for regional and international communication. Nigeria shares borders with several francophone countries, making the study of French not only academically relevant but also strategically important for diplomacy, trade and cultural exchange.

Despite its importance, the teaching and learning of French in Nigeria face several challenges. One of the major challenges facing Nigeria French students in their bid to learn French is language interference. Learners often unconsciously transfer linguistic features from their mother tongue or from English into French. These transfers affect pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary usage and sentence construction. This is so because; each native language has trained its speakers to pay different kinds of attention to events and experiences when talking about them. This training is carried out in childhood and it is exceptionally resistant to restructuring in second language acquisition (Slobin 1996:89).

The theory of contacts and the theory of bilingualism explain the theoretical grounding for interference. Bilingualism is a situation whereby a person speaks or having command of more than one language: native and foreign. The two languages differ in the degree of command. According to Lekova (2010:230) bilingualism can be divided into two: correlative and subordinate bilingualism. In correlative bilingualism, both language system exist together in the individual's mind and are independent of one another. When individual has good command of the two languages there is no interference. In the case of subordinate bilingualism, the second language is not mastered to the degree the first language is. Her mother tongue dominates and influences the second language leading to interference. Communication between two language systems is the reason for the interference which is the object of Psycholinguistics and linguistic research.

This paper explores the concept of interference in the learning of French in Nigeria, identifies its major forms and causes, and proposes strategies for overcoming it. By examining both linguistic and pedagogical factors, the study seeks to contribute to improved French language instruction and to enhance learners' communicative competence. Addressing interference effectively will

not only improve academic performance but also strengthen Nigeria's capacity for regional integration and global participation. At this juncture, it is quite important to consider some definitions of interference.

Definitions of interference

Psycholinguistics describes interference as a negative transfer of language habits and skills from the mother tongue or from a foreign language to another foreign language. And from the linguistic point of view, interference is an interaction or a change in linguistics structures and structural elements. It is a deviation from linguistics norms in the spoken and written language.

Routledge Dictionary of Language and Linguistics defines it as a "the influence of one linguistics system on another in either (a) the individual speaker (transfer) or (b) the speech community (borrowing language contact). In an individual, interference is seen as source of errors (error analysis, contrastive analysis), in a speech community, as a source of language change. For many linguists, the term "interference" has come to include the concept of analogy (as in a language internal interference).

Furthermore, the dictionary of Linguistic and Phonetics also defines interference as "a term used in sociolinguistics and foreign language learning to refer to the errors a speaker introduces into one language as a result of contact with another language : also called negative transfer.

From the above definitions we can deduce the fact that when two languages come in contact interference is inevitable.

According to Lakova (2010), there are two types of interference namely: **interlanguage {explicit}** and **intralanguage (implicit)**.

Interlanguage interference: In the teaching and learning of French as a second, third or fourth language in Nigeria's schools (primary, secondary or tertiary institutions), the most common mistakes occur in interlanguage interference. In this case, mistakes appear because of the negative transfer of habits from the native languages (sometimes from the first foreign language that is supposed to be in very good command) to the second language; in this instance, French. Typical examples of interlanguage interference are:

* Je suis 18 ans instead of j'ai 18 ans.

*Je mangé instead of j'ai mangé

*Elle aime sa mari instead of elle aime son mari.

Intralanguage Interference: This occurs when learners make mistakes under the influence of the already acquired language knowledge and establish habits in the foreign language. For instance:

J'ai allé à l'école instead of je suis allé à l'école

Elle a tombé dans la rue instead of elle est tombé dans la rue

These mistakes result from non-mastery properly the formation of past perfect tense in French.

Lakova (2010) adds interference is explicit when learners make mistakes in oral and written foreign language expressions transferring language habits from the native to the foreign language and thus they ignore the norms of foreign speech like the examples given above.

With implicit interference, learners do not make mistake because they avoid using grammatical and lexical difficulty constructing phrases without it. In this way there are no mistakes but the speech becomes simpler and poorer and it loses its expressive and idiomatic aspect. The object of implicit interference is lexical notions and grammatical forms which do not have an equivalent in the native language. Les pronoms adverbiaux `` **en** and **y**`` fall under the influence of the implicit interference.

The answer of the question: “ Tu vas à la bibliothèque? “instead of: “Non, **j’en reviens**” very often is: “Non, je reviens”, “Veux-tu du café?” the answer the student will give is: “Non, merci, je ne veux pas” instead of: “ **Non, merci, je n’en veux pas**”; or "Allez-vous au théâtre?", «Oui, je vais souvent» instead of «**Oui, j’ y vais souvent**». Intralanguage and implicit interference are more uncommon in comparison to interlanguage one. (See Lekova 2010).

Contrastive Analysis Theory

Contrastive Analysis Theory is a linguistic approach that explains second language learning difficulties by systematically comparing a learner’s first language (L1) with the target language L2. The Theory proposes that many errors in second language acquisition result from transfer of habits from the mother tongue to the new language.

The theory was strongly developed by Robert Lado in his influential book “Linguistics across Cultures (1957). Lado argues that “those elements that are similar to the learner’s native language will be simple, and those that are different will be difficult”. The statement forms the central principle of Contrastive Analysis.

Contrastive Analysis rests on three main assumptions:

- Language habits transfer- the transfer of sounds, grammar, vocabulary and sentence structures from their first language into the target language.
- Similarities ease learning (positive transfer) - when languages share similar structures, learners learn faster.
- Differences cause difficulty (negative transfer/ interference) - when structures differ greatly, learners experience errors.

The Contrastive Analysis theory is relevant to the Nigerian Context because learners are often: bilingual or multilingual, they are exposed first to English structures and through systematic comparison of the languages acquired by the students, teachers can predict problem areas and design targeted instruction. This makes teaching more scientific and preventive rather than corrective.

By foregrounding this theory, the present paper argues that effective French instruction in Nigeria must integrate contrastive techniques to minimize interference and improve proficiency.

Types of Interference

The major areas of interference are: phonological interference, grammatical interference and lexical interference.

Phonetic interference mistakes

Phonetic interference affects the improper pronunciation of phonetic sounds in the second language caused by the existence of different phonetic structures from the point of view of the mother tongue or the first foreign language. Thus, for instance, Yoruba speakers learning French will produce these words thus:

“vrai” will be pronounced [frɛ]

élève [elɛf]

je [dʒe].

From the examples above, we can see the substitution of the sound [f] for [v].

There are a lot of cases of phonetic interference in non-observance of the rules for intonation of the French phrase, merging and accent.

(b) Grammatical interferences.

Grammatical interference concerns changes in the structure and the structural elements in the foreign language. It is caused by semantic and formal resemblances and distinctions between the native and the foreign language system. When the rules of combination of the target language are not followed there will be interference.

Il aide **son** mère instead of Il aide **sa** mère

Je n'ai pas **de** l'argent instead of Je n'ai pas **d'**argent.

Les filles sont **partis** instead of les filles sont **parties**.

Kola **vas** au marché instead of kola **va** au marché

Je ne mange pas **de la** viande” instead of “Je ne mange pas **de** viande”;

Il a **des** bons amis” instead of “Il a **de** bons amis”.

(c) **Lexical interference:** lexical interference has to do with the wrong use of words, narrowing or expansion of the word meaning, formation of non-existing lexical items using foreign suffixes. It is often said:

Que Dieu vous **blessé** instead of que Dieu vous **bénisse**.

Je voudrais **tourner** votre attention sur ce problem instead of Je voudrais **attirer** votre attention sur ce problème.

Il faut prendre **le medicine** instead of il faut prendre **le médicament**

J'ai l'habilité de faire le travail instead of j'ai **la capacité** de faire le travail.

Parfois les apprenants écrivent **envelope** instead of enveloppe, **literature** instead of **litterature**, **dinner** instead of **diner** etc.

Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis

Lakova (2010) opines `` the main approaches for the studying and overcoming of interference are the use of contrastive analysis and error analysis. `` According to him, the scientific juxtaposition of languages is one of the most rational approaches for improvement in foreign language teaching. Fries (1945:9) equally submits `` *the most efficient material are those that are based upon a scientific description of the language to be learned, carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner.*

Lakov adds in some theoretical conceptions the subject of description are contrastive phenomena; in others - the set of distinctions between the grammars of the two languages .More scientifically sound is the statement that similarities, as well as differences between languages should be considered because only the reciprocal complement of the two provides an opportunity for complete language characterization. The juxtaposition of language systems occurs on the levels of system, norm and usage. (3)

A Distinctions on system level:

Absence of a category in one language which is present in the other language. For instance, nouns in French are either masculine gender or feminine gender but it is not like that in English and Yoruba. French has different articles to distinguish genders (le, la, les, un, une, des etc). For example:

le garçon (n.masculin)

La fille (n. feminine)

Les filles (Fem. Plural)

b. Differences on Norm level:

Languages differ not only in terms of existing categories, but with respect to the distinctive combination of language items. For instance it will be wrong in French to say the following:

* Le fille est belle. (la fille est belle)

* La garçon est beau. (le garçon est beau)

The masculine noun is preceded by (le) while the feminine noun is preceded by (la). The learner often find it difficult to associate correctly gender and noun because, the gender of a noun may not be detected from the meaning of the noun.

c. Juxtaposition on usage level:

The purpose is to choose the most appropriate form from those available which the language bearer will use. That is to say, usage mistakes in the usage create a “foreign accent” and reveal the foreign speaker. For example: ”Il est dans son cabinet” is used instead of ”Il est dans son bureau”; “ Je suis allé vivre dans un hotel instead of “Je suis allé loger dans un hôtel” ; The most likely interference on use level appears in the metaphorical use of words and grammatical forms. Contrastive analyses put forward the theoretical aspects of interference, and error analysis – its practical aspects. Error analysis in language teaching and learning according to Crystal (2008) is

a technique for identifying, classifying and systematically interpreting the unacceptable forms produced by someone learning a foreign language, using any of the principles and procedures provided by linguistics. Errors are assumed to reflect, in a systematic way, the level of competence achieved by a learner; they are contrasted with ‘mistakes’ which are PERFORMANCE limitations that a learner would be able to correct.

Juxtaposition states the similarities and differences between languages pointing to opportunities for a potential interference while the error analyses determines the real deviations from the Norm or usage in the spoken and written speech of a bilingual speaker in a particular context.

Scientific studies of interference include a combination of a theoretical aspect/contrastive analyses/ and a practical aspect (error analysis). For example:

1. Definite Articles

English	Yoruba	French
The	naa	le/la/les

English sentences:

The boy is dancing.

The woman is dancing.

The men are dancing.

The women are dancing.

Yoruba sentences:

Okunrin **naa** n jo (masculine singular)

Obinrin **naa** n jo (feminine singular)

Awon okunrin **naa** n jo (masculine plural)

Awon obinrin **naa** n jo (feminine plural)

French sentences :

Le garçon danse (m. sing.)

La femme danse (fem. Sing.)

Les garçons/les hommes dansent (m.plural)

Les femmes dansent (fem. Plural)

A close observation of the sentences above shows the distinction in the use of the definite article in the three languages. The article (**the**) used in the English sentences do not change at the level of gender and at the level of number. This can equally be seen in Yoruba sentences (**náà**) but not so with the sentences in French (**le, la, et les**).

(2) Verb

If we equally look at the verb (**jó**) in Yoruba language, the verb remains unchanged at the level of gender and number contrary to that of English and French. The auxiliary verb used in the English sentences changed at the level of number (**is** and **are**). The same thing is applicable to French sentences. The singular subject used singular verb (**danse**) while the plural subject used plural verb (**dansent**). We can also see from the sentences given above that, the mark of present tense in Yoruba is (**ń**) that of the English is (ing-I am dancing and that of French is (**e and ent**) . In English the verb remains unchanged from the first person singular to the third person plural while in French the verb varies (**danse** and **dansent**) from the first person singular to the third person plural.

Eng.	French	Yoruba
I am dancing	Je danse	Mo ń jó
You are dancing	Tu danses	O ń jó
He/She is dancing	Il / Elle danse	Ó ń jó
We are dancing	Nous dans ons	A ń jó
They are dancing	Vous dansez	È ń jó
	Ils/Elles dans ent	Wón ń jó

If the differences are not properly mastered by the learners, it can lead to linguistic errors phonetically, lexically and grammatically. So, the role of contrastive and error analysis at all levels of interference cannot be over emphasized.

Overcoming mistakes according to Lakova (2010) is carried out in two directions. They are providing against interference mistakes and corrective strategies in case mistakes are already a fact.

Preventive measures require:

- * Teachers to be in very good command of not only the foreign language but also of their mother tongue. Thus, they will be aware of the mother tongue interference and will take adequate measures;
- * When compiling course books or educational materials to consider the native language system peculiarities and to bear in mind the common mistakes in the particular foreign language learning;
- * the preparation of files of typical mistakes which the foreign language teachers should review before teaching or practicing the language material with his/her students;
- * The creation of a card file of mistakes according to the teaching stage and the type of speech activity: spoken or written.
- * The use of an appropriate progress evaluation strategy in teaching so that exercises are conducted in such a way as to avoid interference.

Corrective measures involve:

- * establishing a system with exercises for overcoming phonetic, lexical and grammatical interference mistakes;
- * Exercises with verbs which change their meaning in accordance with the preposition they are used with;
- * Exercises where nouns change according to Number and Gender;
- * Exercises with nouns having only singular form in the foreign language to which correspond plural nouns in the mother tongue and vice versa;
- * Exercises for translation

Finally, the place of acculturation in foreign language learning should not be handled with levity. Students should be allowed to travel to a country where the language is being used as their native language this will go a long way to assist the students to adequately master the language in question.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the problem of language interference in French will be on the increase if adequate measures are not put in place. In the teaching and learning of French language in Nigeria the instructors should know that the mother tongue of the learner and the first foreign language



learnt can be of help. The mother tongue has established the learners' language world and has acquainted students with the problems of language phenomena and therefore it is the mother tongue which will enable them to learn a new language. That is why teachers should know the systems of both languages very well without that good result cannot be expected.

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