

## French Language Teaching and Learning at the Tertiary Level in a Pandemic Lockdown Nigeria: Pressures and Prospects

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**Abstract:** *A pandemic lockdown situation is not much different from a war situation. Nations brainstorm on how to get on, get by and survive and do what can be done while hoping for a quick return to normalcy.*

*Teaching and learning have been affected all over the world to an alarming extent due to the sudden break in studies. The teaching and learning of French language are by extension affected too. The study examined the bright side of the pandemic that in every war situation, opportunities abound. This article suggests what the teaching and learning of French language in Nigeria should look like in a pandemic lockdown at the tertiary level. This article aims to point at some gains for the Nigerian French Language teachers and students in a pandemic lockdown. French language teachers, French students, parents of French Language students, and the government all have practical roles to play, ensuring that the learning of the French language is not halted in a pandemic. The article sets basis, Skinner's theory of behaviourism and Krashen's second language acquisition theory as it discusses alternatives to the French students' immersion program and French language teachers' language training abroad.*

**Keywords:** French language, Teacher, Student, Teaching and learning, Pandemic lockdown, Information Communication Technology.

### Introduction

French, the official language of France and other francophone countries, is the second official language in Nigeria. By virtue of the enviable position it occupies as the second most important language in the world and Nigeria language policy, it is expected that many Nigerians will be fluent in the language as well as prolific in the writing of French as well. Moreover, one of the many reasons the French language is being taught in Nigeria is due to its proximity to four neighboring countries who speak French as their official language. Nigeria has boosted its international, cultural, economic, and political relations with countries like the Republic of Benin, Cameroun, Chad, Republic of Niger, the Ivory coast, etc. and with France as a European country by adopting the French language as its second official language. To a reasonable extent, the teaching and learning of French language in Nigeria have been progressive. Some teachers of the language and other professionals have enjoyed the benefits of attending work-related training and workshops in these French-speaking countries. According to Topstudents (2018), French language students have enjoyed the language-improvement opportunity of their compulsory immersion programme in Institutions like the Nigeria French Language Village and the neighboring Republic of Benin.

The history of French language in Nigeria started from the 16th century. It was introduced as a secondary subject in Yaoundé Conference (1961). This conference recommended the introduction of teaching and learning of French language, and it was to be taught and examined as a school discipline in Anglophone Africa, including Nigeria. This was done as a result of the great importance of the language (Faniran, 2016). But currently, Burgess & Sievertsen

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(2020) is of the view that the global lockdown of educational institutions is going to cause a major (and likely unequalled) interruption in students' learning; this is because (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020) also agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic is first and foremost a health crisis and many countries have (rightly) decided to close schools, colleges, and universities. There will consequently, be an interruption in the learning of French language due to the pandemic lockdown in Nigeria. Teaching is moving online, on an untested and unprecedented scale. Student assessments are also moving online, with a lot of trial and error and uncertainty (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020). This implies that teaching and learning of French will also move online in Nigeria.

Despite this unpreparedness and uncertainty about teaching and learning the French language online, we cannot but give it a good shot. How else do we project the French language, being a foreign language, in a COVID-19 pandemic like this, other than to do the little or the most we can to keep the flame of the French language burning brightly? This article tries to look at what the teaching and learning of French language in Nigeria will and should look like in a case of the type of pandemic lockdown we are currently in. Should the teaching and learning of the French language in Nigeria be locked down too? What can the government, the teachers, and parents of French language students put in place to facilitate continuous learning of the language in this lockdown and a future pandemic lockdown in Nigeria? This article seeks to suggest practical ways to keep the teaching and the learning of French language alive in a pandemic lockdown.

### **Situating the Rationale within Current Tides**

The recent call by the Honourable Minister of Education to Vice-Chancellors (VCs), Provosts and Rectors of tertiary education institutions to recommence their aborted academic sessions as a result of COVID-19 pandemic has raised serious issues not only in the educational sector but specifically in language teaching and especially French language learning and teaching. "In Nigeria, there is this restricted view that 'French' as a discipline has to do with just the study of French language as a means of communication. Consequently, there is usually low subscription with regard to the study of French in Nigerian private universities, where the school fees are relatively high. In the federal and state universities where the fees are low and subscription higher, most of the candidates that take up French as a programme of study, do so out of desperation" (Abiodun-Eniayekan, Awowgu-Maduagu, & Owoeye, 2016, p. 1).

Before now, French language teaching in Nigeria has been mostly traditional. The French student rarely saw any need to question or verify online what he has learnt in class. This is mostly because, in the past, the Nigerian French language student had only his textbooks to easily consult. The introduction of French entitled as a second or foreign language has psychologically placed a need for an upgrade in the teaching and learning of French language in Nigeria. If we say a language is "foreign", "belongs to the French", would it not be psychologically motivating for the teachers and learners of the language to be abreast of some techniques the owners of the language are using currently to teach and learn other foreign languages?

The introduction of French for Special Purpose in Nigeria has been a laudable and practical idea in ensuring that more professionals in Nigeria are indoctrinated in the art of understanding, reading, writing, and speaking basic French. We now enter a period in the history of teaching and learning of French language where every French language student should be treated as having a specific need: the need for continuous learning of a second language in a pandemic lockdown, the specific purpose of learning the French language online. French will now have to be tailored for a common Special Purpose. Teachers of the French language and French language curriculum and programme developers now have to brainstorm on recreating the French language curriculum for Nigerian students, particularly in the tertiary institutions. The government, parents, and teachers of French language students are being called upon to work together to motivate the Nigeria French language student in the learning of the French language particularly in a pandemic lockdown because according to Abell motivation and anxiety both play pivotal roles in a student's progress or lack thereof in building language proficiency (2016).

The COVID-19 lockdown has made it imperative for teachers and curriculum developers of French language in Nigeria to consider overhauling the present curriculum for tertiary institutions. This is with a view to strengthening the capacity of Nigerian French language graduates to compete for roles and responsibilities at both national and global levels. With the dynamics of a post-pandemic world here to stay, we may begin to bid farewell to the days when most Nigerian French language graduates end up in classrooms as teachers or lecturers. Nigerian French language students are equally as ambitious as their counterparts in medical, engineering, law, and architectural schools. Concerted efforts aimed at ensuring that their legitimate aspiration for relevance in an ever-changing world should be made and the present curriculum may be a take-off point. Every effort made in this regard will go a long way in uplifting the status of French language as a course of study in Nigeria, ditto for the students. A multiplication of knowledge and opportunities are envisaged in this domain. Possibilities exist for a curricular revision to accommodate present global realities in Brand Communications, Project Management, Journalism, Advocacy, Emergency Response, Food Security, Cyber Security, Information Communication Technology (ICT), etc.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This article is based on certain theories that apply to learning and language acquisition – theory of behaviourism on one hand and Krashen's second language acquisition theory on the other hand. Behaviourism is a theory of learning focusing on observable behaviours and discounting any mental activity. Learning is defined simply as the acquisition of new behaviour. Behaviourists call this method of learning conditioning (Pritchard, 2009). Words are regarded as tools or instruments, analogous to the tools, counters, or signal flags sometimes employed for verbal purposes (Skinner, 2014). InstructionalDesign.org (n.d.) states that B.F. Skinner's theory of behaviourism is based upon the idea that learning is a function of change in overt behaviour and that changes in behaviour are the result of an individual's response to events (stimuli) that occur in the environment. Skinner (as cited in Mcleod, 2018) states that "Operant conditioning

is a method of learning that occurs through rewards and punishments for behaviour. Through operant conditioning, an individual makes an association between a particular behaviour and a consequence". Learning is a form of response to Education, language learning is a response especially to stimuli heard.

This response is seen in improved speaking and fluency in the target language. The speaking and fluency is a change in behaviour. One of the earliest scientific explanations of language acquisition was provided by Skinner (1957). As one of the pioneers of Behaviourism, he accounted for language development by means of environmental influence (Lemetyinen, 2012). If the current learning environment the average French language student finds himself in Nigeria is to be documented, then we should very much expect some environmental influence on his capacity to improve himself at learning French as a second language. How has the Nigerian French language student been responding to his environment in terms of his ability to learn a second language? Most importantly, how will he respond in the future? How would he respond in a pandemic lockdown? Will his interest in the French language be sustained in a lockdown? Will the government of Nigeria do what it takes (change in behaviour) to help the Nigerian French language student respond adequately (consequence) to the stimuli he receives about learning the French language? OptiLingo (n.d.) agrees with Skinner's behaviourism theory in that "Theory of Behaviourism says we need feedback to be successful, even in learning a language". In a pandemic lockdown, the Nigerian French Language students will need feedback from their French language teachers; they will need feedback from the government as this will help them to make the necessary adjustments in behaviour to the new French language learning method necessitated by a pandemic lockdown.

The second theory in this framework is Krashen's theory of second language acquisition which states that "Language acquisition is a subconscious process; language acquirers are not usually aware of the fact that they are acquiring language, but are only aware of the fact that they are using the language for communication. The result of language acquisition acquired competence, is also subconscious" (Krashen, 1982). Krashen (1982) further explained that adults have the ability to acquire a second language, just like children but may not be able to achieve the native-like level. The third hypothesis of his second language acquisition theory is the Monitor hypothesis which posits that acquisition and learning are used in very specific ways. Normally, acquisition "initiates" our utterances in a second language and is responsible for our fluency. Learning has only one function, and that is as a Monitor or editor. Learning comes into play only to make changes in the form of our utterance after it has been "produced" by the acquired system (Krashen, 1982). Schutz (2019) builds on this hypothesis, stating that "Language acquisition does not require extensive use of conscious grammatical rules and does not require tedious drill. The acquisition requires meaningful interaction in the target language - natural communication - in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding". From the importance of the Monitor hypothesis of Krashen's second language acquisition theory, I believe and expect that there should be meaningful interactions and communication between the Nigerian French language teachers and French students at the

tertiary level in this pandemic lockdown even if it only relates in part to the established French language curriculum.

### **Conceptualising the Responsibilities of the Key Players**

Certain key players and their important roles cannot be overlooked or downplayed in the sustenance of the teaching and learning of French language in a pandemic lockdown Nigeria. The Nigerian French language teacher, the students, curriculum developers, parents, and the government all have pertinent roles to play in the sustenance of the French language in a pandemic lockdown. To say the least, these key players encourage each other as they take their respective responsibilities.

#### **The Nigerian French Language Teacher in a Pandemic**

The pandemic lockdown French language teacher should not be burdened with the task of getting himself a laptop or financing the other tools of his work, but if he has one, then it is all good. Therefore, what can he do? Right now, a great number of teaching activities have been suspended due to the pandemic lockdown situation, and this could give the Nigerian French language teacher the opportunity to plan and decide to teach online, only pertinent French language-related course work. Since Nigeria has joined the list of countries in Africa which have closed schools and universities (Abutu, 2020). Nigerian French language students cannot go on excursions because onsite academic work has been suspended. Onsite socio-educative activities like drama and debates cannot take place in a pandemic lockdown period. What will then replace this essential part of the teaching of the French language? The Nigerian French language teacher has to now engage the Nigerian French language student in a new language teaching method.

#### ***Excursions***

The Nigerian French language students cannot go out on the essential excursion programmes that form an integral part of their course. French language teachers should encourage their students to send a written essay with a sample title *My Life During COVID-19* which in French language is translated as *Ma vie pendant le COVID-19* or better still, a title like *How We All Say NO To COVID-19* which in French language is translated as *Comment disons nous tous Non au COVID-19?* This is in order to simulate the usual reports sent in by the French students on their return from excursions. The implications for the writing course are even more enlightening. Therefore, the writing of such a suggested topic has served two purposes. The French language teacher will be able to evaluate the students' report-writing skills while noting and correcting grammatical mistakes for the writing course. Because we are in a pandemic lockdown, the French language teacher can do this once a month. The goal is to keep the French student engaged, particularly the not-so-bright students. Every effort by the French teacher to engage, interact, and communicate with his students should be applauded and viewed as good in Nigeria since none of our French language teachers was ever prepared for such a situation.

### ***Orals***

The oral class, too, can be manipulated online. There are no hard and fast rules, and the same topic can be recommended to be discussed by each student in a voice message. The French language teacher simply asks his students to send the voice mail of the said topic to his/her smartphone. He can then take note of errors and make corrections concerning each of the students. In the case where the teacher wants to share the corrections of each student with his class, he can then send to the class as an android device picture a tabulation containing the errors of each student in the case that the French teacher could not immediately lay hands on a computer system to send as a Word or pdf attachment. The French language teacher can equally give dictation to the class online through his smartphone and engage the students in a 'fastest finger' game. Thus, the French language teacher chooses to incorporate some fun while at the same time evaluating the spellings of the dictated words, sentences, or passage. He can thereafter ask his students to send the dictation back to him through their smartphones. The teacher could develop a monologue or asks the students to send in creative monologues about the pandemic lockdown in French language, and he can then make corrections, pick the best monologue for acting and even attach a no-expense price to the best monologue act.

### ***Writing***

This is an opportunity for the French language teacher to swiftly entrench himself in the knowledge of Microsoft review to correct and edit the writings and essays of his students. This largely exterminates the unending stress of trying to figure out the illegible writing of some French students. The process of correcting French language assignments and works of the students and sending it back to the students via a computer system only actually makes the Nigerian French language teacher and the student more computer-savvy. Henceforth, French teachers in the tertiary institutions should not have to continue with the harrowing experience of squinting their eyes to figure out the words in the written assignments of the French language student. This period allows the French language teacher and students to encourage each other in online and offline communications. Nigerian French language teachers could very well send the work schedule for the class or the courses along with the pages of relevant texts to the French students and if necessary, online links and e-books for further consultation and understanding.

### ***French Language Teacher Training***

There are Online Train-to-Teach events specific to local areas (Impact of Covid-19 on Applicants, n.d.) for French Teachers that the Nigerian French Language teacher can leverage on. The training of Nigerian French language teachers has been on-going for years, and this should not necessarily be halted in a pandemic lockdown. Townsend and Bates (2007) already noted that Teacher education is currently facing several tensions as pressures have come from many quarters in the last decade; we should therefore not take any chances at slowing down or halting the French teacher's training for any reason even in a pandemic lockdown. We are in a time of change and "it is a fairly trying time for teacher educators, as well as for anyone else in Education. In many western countries,

governments are now thinking that the cost of educating their populations should be lowered at the same time as they expect school administrators, teachers, and teacher educators, to do much more, in more difficult circumstances, than they have ever done before.” (Townsend & Bates, 2007, p. 4). Directly or indirectly too, the Nigerian French Language Teacher is required to do more than he has been doing. The psychological impact of the continuous training of the Nigerian French language teacher cannot be overemphasised.

There are teacher-training courses dedicated to modern languages (National Modern Languages, n.d.) that the Nigerian French language teacher can participate in and improve on his/her online French language teaching skills. For example, a one-year, postgraduate course in the teaching of modern languages is currently open for admissions in Peterborough; here, the language teacher gets specialist training in how to teach languages. Townsend and Bates (2007, p. 628) talk about the recognition of the importance of ICT curriculum integration and that most teacher education programmes have introduced courses in ICT for future teachers. We suggest and recommend without reservations whatsoever that the Nigerian French Language teacher be supported to undertake courses in ICT. The Nigerian French Language teacher necessarily has to undergo comprehensive ICT training to better weather the storms of a pandemic lockdown and any future drastic change as it relates to his teaching of the French Language. “While this is a commendable development, this conceptualisation of ICT integration assumes that the existing curriculum remains unchanged in terms of what is taught, and ICTs become used as a means for enhancing the delivery of that curriculum” (Townsend & Bates, 2007, p. 629)

### **The Nigerian French-language Student in a Pandemic Lockdown**

To begin, it is believed, according to Ademola, that there are very few of the Nigerian French language students who left the secondary school with the desire of proceeding to study the French language in the university because French “was considered not compulsory at senior secondary school and a non-vocational subject in the senior secondary curriculum (2016). People do not see any possibility of making a promising career out of French language apart from the teaching profession (Ademola, 2016). If the French language has been taught in Nigerian secondary schools with all the different resources and practicability that could be available for exploration, the case might be significantly different.

French Language students in Nigeria have a lot of options to personally improve their French language skills in a pandemic lockdown. They are encouraged to be more productive with their smartphones as they may be required to send in videos of monologues or solo performances and other French language-related assignments for their teacher’s appraisal. Some ideas that the French language teacher might not remember to mention in class or the course of his/her teachings, the students may use their smartphones and other devices to bring such to light.

French language students in Nigeria can begin to think of diversifying now. It is called adding knowledge to knowledge. The nature of French language itself does better, exists better, manifests better when combined with other areas of interest; the nature of French language is such that it is ever ready to be combined with other courses provided the learner is ready and decided. Some of the areas

of interest and short-term courses that the French language learner can begin to study or read about for free even on his devices are basic project management, basic journalism, freelance journalism, emergency-response readiness, diplomacy, civil society advocacy, poetry writing, and publications, etc. The knowledge and involvement of the French language student in these other areas will progressively improve his/her vocabulary of French language in the said field of interest.

### *Annual Language Immersion Program*

Given a long period of a pandemic lockdown, it is clear that the Nigerian French language student might not be able to fully undertake the usual annual French Language immersion; given this fact, the Nigerian French language student should buckle up to simulate and undergo a different form of French language immersion experience. Living in a French country or French village like The Nigeria French Language Village “is arguably the best way to learn a foreign language” (Kostiuk, 2015). According to Kostiuk (2015), being surrounded by the French language every day provides endless opportunities for learning and practice. It is some of these opportunities put forward by Kostiuk for any international language immersion that we are suggesting to be simulated by the Nigerian French language student in a pandemic lockdown.

First, I suggest that the French students learn technical vocabulary by changing the digital language settings on their smartphones, cameras, computers, or TV to French. In addition to changing the universal settings on their devices, they can change the settings in individual programs, such as their internet browser to French. Kostiuk (2015) suggests they can change the language on websites or applications they use frequently to French. Secondly, we encourage Nigerian French language students, according to Kostiuk (2015), to browse the French language versions of international news sources like the Africa News, BBC, Africa24, RFI, and Google News. Thirdly, French language students should get a conversation partner. This does not need to be a teacher. In fact, sometimes it is better if the conversation partner is not a teacher because the goal here is not to drill new vocabulary or work through lessons in a book. It is about having a friendly conversation if possible, with a native speaker (Kostiuk, 2015). That friendly conversation can help the student practice what he is learning at home and give him a feel for the flow of the language, according to Kostiuk (2015). There are pen pals and pen friends sites online that the Nigerian French student could consult for a conversational partner in French.

Kostiuk (2015) suggests the language student can start putting labels of phrases in the language around his/her room or bedside his/her desk or table. The French language student can imitate this genial action of a language learning since he is indoors most times in a pandemic lockdown. He can **label his desk, window, coffee mug, and bookshelf, anything he wants!** All it takes is masking tape and a pen (Kostiuk, 2015). Lastly, the Nigerian French language student can engage in online freelance journalism, emergency-response readiness and contact-tracing in the current pandemic lockdown, poetry writing, and publications, as pointed out earlier; the knowledge and involvement of the French language student in these areas will progressively improve his repertoire of French

vocabulary as would have been achieved in a normal year-abroad immersion programme.

### **Parents and the government Face-to-Face in the Pandemic Lockdown**

There are insinuations that there is a failure in the implementation policy by the government or policymakers for the teaching and learning of French language in Nigeria. The first challenge facing teaching and learning of French language in Nigeria is that of bad policymaking (Ademola, 2016). This is obvious in certain aspects of some of the French curricula in Nigeria, and online learning is a good place to start. Online learning is a type of E-learning that depends entirely on the internet and support system. It requires certain behavioural changes and regulatory adjustments to make it work for the learner. It cannot be established by the mere ministerial directive and bureaucratic fiat but through careful and detailed planning, funding, and training by those involved (Sahara Reporters, 2020). The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) University of Ibadan (UI) publicity chapter went on to say that online learning depends critically on an effective library system, with online resources and seamless access from across the globe. No Nigerian Library, including the National Library, has a semblance of a kindergarten library in serious countries (Sahara Reporters, 2020).

As countries are considering easing restrictions and gradually resuming onsite Education, governments should ensure that "Disease transmission is under control and that Health systems are able to detect, test, isolate and treat every case and trace every contact" (Education International, 2020). Indeed, the government and parents need to start planning towards ensuring that laptop ownership is made compulsory for all Nigerian French language students. "Families are central to education and are widely agreed to provide major inputs into a child's learning" as described by Bjorklund & Salvanes (as cited in Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020). We need to get all hands on deck for any form of online teaching to take place in our universities (Deji-Folutile, 2020). We need to take advantage of technology like the case in other parts of the world. We cannot shut down all schools when we have other means to teach our students (Abiodun, 2020). Recently, Adedigba (2020) reported that the spokesperson of the National Universities Commission (NUC), Ibrahim Yakassai, highlighted that online mode of learning is beyond WhatsApp and Telegram groups, which most universities and students refer to as online classes.

Nevertheless, while waiting for the Nigerian government, to implement basic online and internet learning platforms and training through the provision of laptop computers and working internet connection for French language teachers and students. We can, as a people, in our different capacities, do our best in ensuring that the teaching and learning of the French language do not remain locked down. EduCeleb.com understands that some tertiary institutions in Nigeria have continued to teach online despite the challenges identified (EduCeleb, 2020). Curriculum planners should moreover be informed of the pertinence of adjusting the French language curriculum to be combined with other courses.

The Nigerian French language curriculum planners could now offer the French language student the opportunity to begin to think of diversifying. The nature of French language is such that it can be combined with other courses

provided the course lecturers are available, and the learner is ready and decided. According to Babs (2017), some of the areas of interest, short term courses that the French language curriculum developers in Nigeria can develop to be combined to the French language are French/ Advertising, French/ Human Resource, French/ Project Management, French/ Journalism, French/International Diplomacy, French/Development Studies, French/Public Affairs.

### Conclusion and Implication for Practice

A pandemic lockdown situation is usually not one envisaged or prepared for. Indeed there has never been a good enough preparation by any nation for a pandemic lockdown; nevertheless, all sectors of life and the economy are affected. As it is with and in a pandemic lockdown, a heavy dependency is thrown on Information Communication Technology (ICT). This, therefore, means that the teachers, particularly French language teachers and students, will be heavily dependent on ICT during the period. Even though Townsend and Bates (2007) distinguish between the provision of ICTs (e.g. Internet capability) in schools and meaningful learning with ICTs by students, both actions still need to be properly put in place in Nigeria as indicated by the response of the ASUU (Academic Staff Union of Universities) University of Ibadan (UI) publicity chapter to the minister of Education. From the discussions in this article, it is clear that there will be and should be a change in the teaching method of the Nigerian French Language teacher, particularly in a developing nation like Nigeria, where the government still needs to put the necessary infrastructure in place. There will be changed expectations for the Nigerian French language students as well. It is not going to be business as usual. It has been shown that the Nigerian French language student can maximise the usage of his handy devices to achieve major French language learning goals. He can use his smartphone to accomplish daily, simple, small, albeit important tasks as it relates to his learning of French language in Nigeria. Other stakeholders, like the parents of the French students, should motivate their wards, where possible, with the provision of smart devices. Curriculum planners of the French language are encouraged to use the opportunity presented by the pandemic lockdown, to institute major changes and adjustments to the curriculum of the French Language study in Nigeria. One significant envisaged change in the French language teaching and learning curriculum should be its compliance with an online study as this will forestall any future destabilisation that could be presented in the form of another pandemic lockdown.

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