

FRENCH LANGUAGE AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The experiences a child acquire in his earliest years greatly affect his success or otherwise when he grows up. This explains why early childhood education is prerequisite and foundational in any nation. Educating the child at an early stage ensures a better and sustainable future both for the child and the society. Therefore, children need to be given many opportunities to acquire an all-encompassing education. In Nigeria, while the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2014) has specified the guidelines for operating pre-primary education, no attention is accorded to the learning of the French (the language of the neighboring countries). In order to bridge this gap, the paper postulates in favor of the introduction of French language in the early education curriculum in Nigeria and suggests ways of developing young learners' French language skills for a sustainable future through interactive simulation classroom activities.

Key words: *French language, Early Childhood, Education, Early Childhood Education, Nigeria*

Introduction

Early Childhood Education is a specialized form of education offered to children of preschool age. In more specific terms, Brewer (2007) states that it is a period from birth to age eight. The author however distinguished between preschool (preprimary and primary age) made up of 'preschoolers (three and four years old); primary (five, six, seven and eight years old). It is worthy of note that the early childhood years are important in the life of a human being in terms of the learning that occurs, the attitudes about learning and school that are developed, and the social skills that are acquired that will enable the individual to succeed in life. As a result, at that early stage, the curriculum is

designed to cater for the multiple needs of the child such as health, nutrition, psycho-social and communication skills of little children and to prepare them for readiness to formal education. Bearing this in mind, the developers of the Nigerian curriculum recommended that the one-year pre-primary should be included in the Nigerian system of education (NPE, 2014). Unfortunately, in the said curriculum, no mention is made about the learning of the French language. Considering the importance of foreign language acquisition and the fact that Nigeria is surrounded by Francophone countries, this paper advocates for the introduction of the teaching of French language to preschool children in Nigeria with the belief that it will serve as a foundation upon which Nigerian children can develop their full potentials for maximum optimization later in life.

Definition and Brief History of Early Childhood Education

Early Childhood Education (ECE) can be defined as any form of educational program designed for children in their preschool years. It is often presented in form of a variety of educational activities that enable young children to acquire some basic skills, but also prepare them for the nursery and primary schools. According to Charles, Gast, Servey and Burnside, (1978), the early childhood stage is generally considered as the period from birth till about the age of five or six. In Nigeria, it is the period before the official primary school age when children are enrolled in educational establishments commonly tagged as crèche/day care/playgroup, pre-nursery, nursery classes and kindergartens.

Early childhood is a crucial stage in a child's physical, intellectual, emotional and social development. Consequently, any type of formal education received at that stage has the potential of shaping the foundation of the child's life and enhancing the mental and academic development of the child. It is therefore very important to recognize the pertinence of early childhood education and its impacts on the child's later life.

Historically, the concept of early childhood education is attributable to Martin Luther (1483-1546) who was among the first people to believe in the universality of education. He emphasized that education could strengthen the family as well as the community and argued that introducing education at an early stage could help the children to access the Bible which would be of great benefit to the society (<https://.mym.laureate-media.com>).

French writer and philosopher, Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712 – 1778) is also well known as the father of early childhood education. In his book, *Emile*,

Rousseau explained in detail how children should be educated from infancy (Book 1) to manhood (Book 5). He argues that there are three teachers that educate humans: nature, things, and man. He believes that, among the three, nature is master and posits that since humans cannot control nature, and humans have little control over things, the master teacher must be nature. Rousseau also posits that things are generally made perfect from hands of the Maker of the world but always get bad once they get into the hands of man (Rousseau, 1965). In his theory of child education, Rousseau believes that children will develop all their potentials educationally and morally if they are allowed to develop without any societal constraint. Natural development should be child-driven and focused on the child's needs at each stage of his development. In other words, the child's nature should determine what should be learnt. Rousseau's ideas helped greatly in laying the foundation for early childhood education. As a result of his (Rousseau) educational views, early childhood education emerged as a child-centered entity. No doubt, many elements of Rousseau's educational principles remain till date as a dominant force in early childhood education.

Other scholars who championed ECE include: John Amos Comenius (1590-1690), John Locke (1632-1704), Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1748-1827), Friedrich Froebel (1782-1751), Maria Montessori (1870-1952). While John Amos Comenius (1967) believed that learning for children is rooted in sensory exploration and wrote the first children's picture book to promote literacy, John Locke (1972) brought about the famous 'blank slate', also known as 'tabula rasa' theory and postulated that it is how children interact with the environment that fills their metaphorical 'slate'. On his part, Friedrich Froebel (1903) formalized the early childhood setting and founded the first kindergarten while Maria Montessori (1956) posited that children's senses should be educated first and then their intellect. The teaching method she developed – the Montessori education method - is an internationally recognized mode of educating children till date. Other theorists and experts who made impactful contributions in the area of Early Childhood Education include: Jean Piaget (1896-1980), Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), John Dewey (1859-1952), Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), Erik Erikson (1902-1994) and David Weikart (1931-2003). The goal of all these theorists was to ensure the successful development of children in their future academic pursuit (<https://mym.laureate-media.com>).

Importance of Early Childhood Education

The early years of a human life is generally viewed as the critical period that shapes the course of an individual' development (Powel, 2001). That explains why the main objective of ECE is to lay a solid foundation for a child's growth and development. It gives the child the opportunity to learn and develop his skills and abilities from the early age. The child is generally taught letters, numbers, colors, shapes and forms as well as how to socialize through interaction with other children. All these contribute to the child's social, emotional and cognitive development as well as his cognitive skills enhancement. ECE also plays a crucial role in the preparation or readiness of the child for the kindergarten or nursery school. Above all, early childhood education programs help in developing the child's basic reading-writing skills and knowledge.

Early childhood education programs also have the advantage of helping children to develop their full potential. And, to Kartal and Balantekin (2016), early childhood education plays a crucial role in a child's development in the sense that it minimizes the deficiencies ensuing from family's socioeconomic structure. They explain further that ECE experience or lack of it has numerous effects on the child's adaptation to school and his future academic achievement. In other words, children exposed to ECE have the potential to easily adapt to school life in a sustainable way. This assertion is further buttressed by Shonkoff & Phillips (2000), when they affirm that from birth to age 5, children rapidly develop foundational capabilities on which subsequent development builds. In addition to their remarkable linguistic and cognitive gains, they exhibit dramatic progress in their emotional, social, regulatory, and moral capacities. (Cited by Powell, 2001:31).

Despite the numerous advantages of ECE enumerated above, there is the need to state that not all researchers agree on the pertinence of early childhood education. While researchers like Baker (1973) and Gormley, Gayer, Phillips and Dawson (2005) support early childhood education and posit that it has a positive impact on the child's affective and social development in later years in life. Other researchers like Robinson and Robinson (1968), strongly believe that young children lack the maturity to learn complex educational tasks that are required of them in the pre-school programs. They also argue that mothers love and company are more important to children at that early stage of their life.

Language Learning / Teaching in Early Childhood Education

It is often argued that the early childhood years constitute a critical period in human learning and development. It is also suggested that, at that age, children are very receptive to learning a second language. In this regard, Chomsky (2003:41) states that “every child is born with a language decoder”, which he calls “language acquisition device” (LAD). He explains that the LAD enables the children to recognize underlying structure of grammar of any language they hear, no matter the type of language. In other words, children have the inner ability to learn any language they are exposed to or taught.

Some scholars (Bialystok, 1999; Bialystok, 2001; Bialystok & Viswanathan, 2009) strongly posit that there are lots of benefits for children learning a second language in terms of cognitive function and metalinguistic awareness. While recognizing the fact that many researchers have divergent views on the believe that young children easily acquire a second language, Hu (2016), is of the opinion that, unlike adults, young children have great potentials to acquire a second language in a rapid and efficient way. He argues further that children also have great advantages over adults or adolescents in first and second language acquisition, and concludes that languages are best learned during childhood.

Morford and Mayberry (2000), on their part, note that when children are exposed to second language learning, early in their life, they often perform better than individuals who are exposed to second language when they are much older. This argument presupposes that young learners will perform well in language acquisition. In the same perspective, Lenneberg (1967) affirms that young learners who are exposed to second language learning early achieve language fluency faster, just like native speaker, when compared to adults or adolescents. Merritt (2013) believes that learning a second language can also improve native language skills because the second language learning makes the learner to be conscious of the functioning of the grammar (sentence structure) and pronunciation of the new language and makes him to compare them with his L1. He argues further that the new language skills acquired in the process often give bilingual individuals more information about their own native language and help them to use language more effectively both in oral communication and in writing.

From the foregoing, researchers seem to agree that a second language is easily acquired at the early age of human development. That is to say the earlier a child learns a new language, the easier he will master the language. This is

confirmed by Lenneberg (1967) when he states that when they are exposed early to other languages, apart from their mother tongues, children have the potential of acquiring those languages better and faster than adults.

Early Childhood Education Curriculum in Nigeria

The Nigerian National Policy on Education (NPE, 2014) refers to pre-primary education as the education given in an educational institution to children aged 3 to 5 before they are enrolled into primary school. In other words, children below the age of 3 attending crèches or pre-nursery schools are not captured by the NPE. That form of education was first recognized in the National Policy on Education in 1977. From then it went through series of revision in 1981, 1998, 2004, 2007 and 2014. The operational objectives, as outlined in the National Policy on Education (2004), include, among others:

- i. effecting a smooth transition from the home to the school;
- ii. preparing the child for the primary level of education;
- iii. providing adequate care and supervision while their parents are at work;
- iv. developing a sense of co-operation and team spirit; and
- v. teaching rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes and the like through play and songs

In support of ECE, the developers of the Nigerian curriculum recommended that the one-year pre-primary should be included in the Nigerian system of education. And, considering the importance of foreign language acquisition and the fact that Nigeria is surrounded by Francophone countries like: Niger, Togo, Benin, Chad and Cameroun, the National Policy on Education (2004:10) states that "... for smooth interaction with our neighbours, it is desirable for every Nigerian to speak French. Accordingly, French shall be the second official language in Nigeria and it shall be compulsory in primary and Junior Secondary schools but non-vocational, elective at the Senior Secondary school." Unfortunately, despite this laudable recognition of the need for Nigerians to learn French, no attention is paid to its teaching at the preprimary school stage. That is why this paper is making a case for the teaching of French to Nigerian children during their early stage in life.

Advocacy for the Inclusion of French in ECE Program in Nigeria

It is a well-known fact that one of the first things that a child learns from birth is language. It can be one language or more. If it is true that children learn by repeating and remembering what they observe, then they can learn a lot of things, including a second or foreign language. In line with that assertion, the child should be able to speak his mother tongue (L1) spontaneously and the

language of his immediate environment (if different from his L1) or any additional language (L2). Thus, a three-year-old Nigerian, if unfettered, should be capable of understanding and speaking Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, English, French and any other language based on observation, repetition and recall.

It is argued that children seem to be involved in an efficient way to acquire the new language when set in the foreign language (Singleton and Ryan, 2004). In other words, children have the capacity to become bilingual at their very young age. Uslu and Ersan (2020), on their part, affirm that bilingualism is reported to have a positive effect on the brain when acquired at an early age. And, quoting Merritt (2013), they explain further that children who were involved in learning two languages in early childhood are more skilled in focusing on relevant information, as well as ignoring irrelevant and misleading stimuli. The reason for this is that by learning another language, they move between two different systems of rules and acquire a higher level of difficulty in terms of recognition, interpretation, and language proficiency. They conclude that two languages support critical thinking and improve problem solving (Merritt, 2013).

In line with the above views, English and French should be taught in any given educational set up in Nigeria especially during early childhood education. Even if the two languages do not share the same status (the first being the country's official language while the second is a foreign language), they manifest some common linguistic features such as words with same vocabularies and similar meanings (taxi, football, table, lion, restaurant, garage, bus, intelligent, sport, etc.), words with same spelling but different meaning (chat, agenda, assist, rest, etc.) as well as same sentence formation (subject-verb-object). Based on these similarities, it is assumed that, when he is given the opportunity, a pre-school child, can learn both English and French at the same time. Exposing children, systematically, at an early age to French will also go a long way in enhancing their intellectual capacity and broaden their horizon. It will equip them with necessary skills and abilities to become internationally bilingual at their young age. So, in the spirit of catching them young, French should be integrated into the curriculum of early childhood education in Nigeria. This will also help in preparing them for fruitful future in a globalized society.

Undoubtedly, several reasons can be given regarding why Nigerians should not only embrace French but prioritize it in its system of education at all levels including, of course, pre-school stage. Such reasons include, among many

others, early exposure to foreign language and culture, opportunity to further their studies in francophone countries in Africa or Europe and unlimited future job opportunities for the children when they grow up.

For an effective introduction of French language to preschool children in Nigeria the pedagogy is important. This is because not every teacher can handle early childhood classes. Moreover, teaching preschool children a foreign language like French needs the adoption of peculiar approaches in order to achieve the desired results. Apart from patience, tolerance and friendliness with the children, teachers need to be creative and innovative in their approaches.

ECE teaching activities should be carried out using the play method. Thus, linguistic items or subjects to be learnt should be done using songs, role plays and a lot of repetitions. Researchers have extensively emphasized the importance of play and how it contributes to the child's intellectual growth and understanding of the world. Children should be involved in numerous interactive activities while learning the language. Charts, pictures, audio and video pedagogical aids should be used intensively in order to sustain children's interest and motivation in the French language. Other factors that can enhance quality French language learning during early childhood education include adopting a curriculum geared specifically to young children, dividing children in small group sizes, having well trained staff in ECE and high teacher/child ratio.

Conclusion

Children, irrespective of their origin and sociocultural background deserve to have a good start in life. Their early experiences in early education programs such as crèche, pre-nursery or kindergarten go a long way in affecting their future and determining their success or failure in life. Children being the future citizens of a country, they need to be well trained from their early stage in life. Early childhood education programs should therefore, be put in place by governments all over the world.

In Nigeria, the language teaching component of the ECE needs to be reconsidered in the National Policy on Education. French language should be included in the curriculum at the pre-school stage. It will widen children's horizon for optimal performance when they grow up. For the sustainable future of Nigeria, decision makers, in collaboration with stakeholders in the

education sector should take prompt actions with a view to giving French its prime of place at the early childhood stage.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made:

1. The National Policy on Education should, as a matter of priority, integrate French in the curriculum of Early Childhood Education.
2. Parents should encourage their wards to learn French in their early stage in life
3. More emphasis should be placed on the training of ECE teachers in Nigerian Colleges of Education and Universities because effective early childhood teachers' education is a central component of most policy recommendations on improving early childhood outcomes.
4. Early childhood establishments should be well equipped with the necessary human capital and technological equipment.
5. The pre-school establishments should also provide a rich educative environment to enable children to engage in play of various sorts, with materials that they may not have at home and in the midst of other children that may encourage them in terms of future growth.

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