

# Dictation Practice in French Language: The Secondary School Experience in Ogun State, Nigeria

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## Abstract

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*This study investigates the practice of dictation in French language, in secondary schools. It is restricted to Odeda Local Government Area of Ogun State in Nigeria, where ten (10) Junior Secondary Schools were randomly selected for coverage. A 6-item questionnaire was administered to two hundred (200) students for the purpose of data collection. Findings reveal that dictation in French language is generally not practised in schools, and this may not be unconnected to, among other factors, the observed shortage of teachers to teach the subject (French) in these schools. It is also revealed that most of the students who practise dictation in French do so not only few times per week, but also devote only part of the periods to this activity. Recommendations are therefore made with a view to assisting students enhance their spelling as well as pronunciation aptitudes in French language through intensive and extensive dictation practice.*

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## Introduction

French language education no doubt received an unprecedented official boost in 1998, with the publication of the third edition of the *National Policy on Education* (revised in 2004), which states inter alia 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. (FRN, 1998 : 9 and 2004: . 5).*

Consequently, the teaching and learning of this foreign language became more popular than ever before in schools and tertiary institutions across the country. However, this new dawn that broke for French in Nigeria was and is still not without challenges, as Alo (1999 : 76) rightly observed that:

... pour un Nigérien qui apprend la langue française, les difficultés sont de plusieurs ordres, notamment: phonétique (e.g. la prononciation des mots français), (ortho)graphique (e.g. les fautes courantes, les pluriels irréguliers, les mots à orthographe illogique ou difficile, etc.), grammatical (e.g. la syntaxe, l'emploi des verbes, les conjugaisons irrégulières, le genre et le nombre des mots, etc.), général (e.g. les faux amis, la confusion des signes, la confusion des temps, etc.).

... for a Nigerian who is learning French language, the challenges are multifarious, notably: phonetical (e.g. the pronunciation of

French words), (ortho)graphical (e.g. common errors, irregular plural forms, words with illogical or difficult spelling, etc.), grammatical (e.g. syntax, the use of verbs, irregular conjugations, gender and number of words, etc.), general (e.g. the 'faux amis', confusion of signs, confusion of tenses, etc.) (Translation is ours)

He further added that:

Toutes ces difficultés sont majeures et doivent être correctement traitées par l'enseignant afin de faciliter la tâche de l'élève, ou de lui rendre plus abordable l'apprentissage de cette langue romane qu'est le français.

All these challenges are critical and need to be correctly addressed by the teacher so as to facilitate the task of the learner or to make the learning of this roman language, which is French, more easy for him. (Translation is ours)

It is therefore in the light of the need to address the difficulties associated with the teaching and learning of French language in Nigerian schools (as noted above) that we are agreeing with Turgean and Lussiet (2009 : 1) that Dictation in French language constitutes a veitable tool. According to them,

*Le retour en force de la dictée pourrait être associe a une vision passéiste de l'enseignement du français. Pourtant, nous croyons qu'elle demeure un outil intéressant pour l'enseignement de la grammaire et qu'elle peut également se révéler efficace pour l'apprentissage et le perfectionnement de*

*l'orthographe d'usage de même que pour l'initiation à un vocabulaire spécialisé.*

*The forceful return of dictation could be associated with an old fashioned perception of the teaching of French. Meanwhile, we believe that dictation remains an interesting tool the teaching of grammar and that it can equally prove to be effective for the learning and the perfection of the day-to-day orthography usage as well as for the introduction to a specialized vocabulary (Translationis ours).*

However, at this juncture, it becomes not only convenient but also important to answer the pertinent question "What is Dictation all about?"

#### **Dictation : A Definition Attempt**

From a very simple and perhaps elementary perspective, Dictation may be defined as an activity which consists in producing an audio-oral text with the sole aim of having same reproduced in writing. This therefore implies the need for an audio-oral production source, a text and a written production source. The relationship between these three elements or components is such that the audio-oral producer engages in his/her activity with the full consciousness that what he/she is saying or reading out is being recorded in writing by the writing source who is listening attentively with a view to producing an error-free written text as much as he/she can. The relationship so described no doubt exposes the complexity of Dictation, which may appear simple on the surface. It may therefore not be out of place to describe Dictation as a process.

Conceived thus, Dictation is therefore a process consisting in making a verbalised oral text to be listened to with the aim of having it (i.e. this same text) reproduced in writing (cf. NECO, 2002 - 2004 and 2010 -2012; WAEC, 2004 - 2008 and 2009 - 2012).

From the above, it becomes important to note that an efficient Dictation requires a certain level of competence from both the speaker/reader and the listener/writer.

#### **Types of and Approaches to Dictation**

Two major types of dictation can be identified, based on the symbols expected to be used by the writer to transcribe the verbalised text. When the phonetic alphabet is expected to be used, the dictation is said to be phonetic, phonemic or phonetico-phonemic; but when the orthographic

alphabet is to be used, we refer to such a dictation as orthographic Dictation (cf. Jimoh, 2001).

However, there could be four approaches to dictation, especially within the classroom environment. Each of them shall be briefly explained hereafter (See also Sawyer and Silver, 1981).

These are:

##### **1. The Phonemic Item Approach**

It is the presentation of isolated sounds to learners for transcription. This approach to dictation increases learners' ability to recognise the sounds of the language being learnt and their contrasts, thereby facilitating their accurate production. It is an excellent way to teach learners to stop imposing the sound system of previously acquired language(s) (e.g English) upon that of the language being learnt (e.g. French).

##### **2. The Phonemic Text Approach**

It is an extension of the Phonemic Item Approach. It consists in the reading of a passage to learners who are to transcribe same. It helps learners to understand how the context of occurrence of a sound in connected speech can affect the sound's transcription and/or production in a language like French.

##### **3. The Orthographic Item Approach**

It is the dictation of isolated words to learners who are to transcribe same. It is similar to the traditional spelling test. It helps to reinforce the correlation between the spelling system and the sound system of a language like French.

##### **4. The Orthographic Text Approach**

It is the orthographic dictation with the broadest learning opportunities: It is the orthographic dictation test in which learners are to transcribe unified passages. It is the classic dictation which most teachers of French are familiar with. Besides reinforcing the correlation between the spelling and the sound systems of a language, this approach to dictation helps to uncover comprehension and grammatical weaknesses in learners, which could be addressed in future or subsequent lessons.

#### **Statement of the Problem**

Over the years, it has been observed that the spellings as well as the pronunciation of words constitute a major problem to learners of French in Nigerian schools. This problem has however been traced to Dictation related issues; hence the research questions below.

### Research Questions

Research Questions for this study are as follows.

1. Is Dictation in French language practised in schools?
2. Is Dictation practice accorded much importance in the teaching/learning of French in schools?
3. What are the problems learners face during Dictation practice in French language?

### Significance of the Study

This research is significant in that it would help create (or recreate) the necessary awareness about the importance of Dictation as a veritable tool for enhancing the spelling as well as the pronunciation aptitudes of learners of French in Nieria. Consequently, all the concerned stakeholders (e.g. policy makers as well as agents of policy implementation) would be made to give Dictation its pride of place in what we refer to as the *French Language Policy* in Nigeria.

### Scope of the Study

This study is restricted to the French Language Policy implementation as it affects the practice of dictation in French language in Nigerian schools.

### Aims and Objectives of the Study

The over-riding aim of this study is to proffer

The sex distribution of these subjects shows that, 114 (i.e. 57%) of them are females while 86 (i.e. 43%) are males. Further more, 92 (i.e. 46%) of them are aged between 8 and 13 years, 62 (i.e. 31%) are aged between 14 and 18 years, while the remaining 46 (23%) are aged between 19 years and above.

The schools are:

1. Asero Compreh High School, Asero.
2. Egba High School, Asero.
3. Taidop International College, Asero.
4. Emmanuel International College, Fajol.
5. Faith Heritage International College, Alogi.
6. Saint Stephen's Centre International College, Odo-Eran.
7. FCE Model College, Osiele.
8. Salawu Abiola Comprehensive High School, Osiele.
9. Muslim High School, Isolu.
10. Egba-Odeda Comprehensive High School, Odeda.

### Research Instrument and Method of Data Analysis

Data for this study were collected via a 6-item questionnaire designed for learners. The data so

possible solutions to the observed spelling as well as pronunciation difficulties facing Nigerian learners of French. The specific objectives of the study therefore include:

- i) To find out whether or not dictation in French language is practised in schools;
- ii) To find out whether or not dictation is accorded the attention it deserves as an effective tool for enhancing the spelling as well as pronunciation abilities of learners of French; and
- iii) To recommend possible ways by which dictation practice in French language could be enhanced.

### Delimitations of the Study

This study is limited to Odeda Local Government Area of Ogun State, in South-western geopolitical region of Nigeria.

### Population, Sample and Sampling Technique

The target population for this study is the entire Junior Secondary School learners of French in Odeda Local Government Area of Ogun State. However, due to logistic constraints among others, only two hundred (200) learners of French spread across ten (10) Junior Secondary Schools in the area of study were randomly selected and considered.

collected were analysed using the simple percentage method.

### Findings

Research findings reveal that French

language is taught in all the schools, as all the respondents (i.e. 100%) answered 'Yes' to the question 'Do you learn French language in your school?' (cf. Item 1 of Research Instrument). Meanwhile, with respect to Item 2 of Research Instrument, 60% (i.e. 120) of the respondents answered in the negative while 40% (i.e. 80) of them answered in the affirmative. This is an indication that Dictation in French language is not practised in most schools (cf. Research Question 1).

Besides, statistical details of answers to the question 'How many times do you practise Dictation in French language in a week?' (cf. Item 3 of Research Instrument) show that 50% (i.e. 40 out of 80) of the respondents who practised Dictation were doing so only once a week while 40% (i.e. 32 out of 80) and 10% (i.e. 8 out of 80) of them were doing so twice and thrice a week respectively. This is an indication that Dictation practice in French language is not accorded the deserved attention in schools (cf. Research Question 2). It is further discovered that only 25% (i.e. 20 out of 80) of the respondents who did practise Dictation devoted the full period of French class to this practice while the remaining 75% (i.e. 60 out of 80) of them devoted only part of the period to the practice of Dictation in French (cf. Answers to Item 4 of Research Instrument - 'How long do you practise Dictation in a period of French?'). This further confirms that Dictation practice in French language is yet to receive the attention it deserves as an effective tool for teaching and learning French in schools (cf. Research Question 2).

Research findings further reveal that majority of the schools have only 1 teacher of French language, as statistical details of answers to Item 5 of Research Instrument - '**How many teachers of French are there in your school?**' - show that 124 respondents (i.e. 62%) choose 1, 32 respondents (i.e. 16%) choose 2, 28 respondents (i.e. 14%) choose 3 while the remaining 16 respondents (i.e. 8%) choose 'more than 3' (cf. Research Question 3).

Finally, statistical details of answers to **Item 6 of Research Instrument - 'What are the problems you face during Dictation practice in a French language class?'** - show that 32.5% (i.e. 26 out of 80) of respondents who practised dictation were faced with pronunciation/spelling problem, 40% (i.e. 32 out of 80) of respondents who practised dictation were having listening/auditory discrimination problem while 27.5% (i.e. 22 out of 80) of the respondents who practised dictation were having writing/sound-letter correspondence problem (cf. Research Question 3).

## Discussion of Findings

Going by the above findings, the implementation of what we call the French Language Policy in Nigeria may be said to be just fair. This is because, though the subject (French) is taught in virtually all Junior Secondary Schools, its status as a compulsory subject (in accordance with the stipulations of the NPE) remains questionable; and this (among other factors) invariably accounts for the inadequate provision of teachers of this subject as well as time (cf. Number of periods per week) especially in public schools.

Besides, from the findings, it appears that teachers of French are not quite aware of the benefits derivable from the regular practice of dictation (as discussed above). This may partly explain why their students are generally not exposed to its practice. However, teachers may deliberately be avoiding the practice of Dictation in French language (as observed in some cases) in order to cover up their own inefficiency in oral French, as required for effective Dictation practice (as noted above). In the light of this, we have remarked elsewhere that pronunciation remained a major problem for average Nigerian learners of French language (cf. Jimoh, 1999).

## Conclusion and Recommendations

It is no gain saying that, like in many other sectors of the Nigeria life, the French Language Policy in Nigeria (as revised in 2004) is quite a good one, if well implemented. Consequently, it becomes imperative to make the following recommendations with a view to enhancing its implementation.

Since no educational system can rise above the quality of its teachers, teacher training institutions should ensure that they turn out quality teachers who are verse enough in virtually all the four communication skills as they relate to French language. This is because a teacher who masters his/her subject well enough easily wins his/her pupils' attention and arouses their interest in the subject (cf. NCCE, 2012).

As a compulsory subject, coupled with its foreign nature, enough opportunities need to be provided for students to be in contact with French language; hence the need to ensure that a minimum of three periods per week is allocated to French in all schools, while dictation should form part of every lesson if it cannot constitute a whole lesson in itself.

In order to ensure acceptable pronunciation standard during dictation practice, teachers may make use of resource persons who may be brought to class in person or whose pre-recorded voice could be used.

Intra as well as Inter-institutional French competitions

among students should be revived and better organised to promote healthy competition not only among students, but also among teachers and even schools who not want to loose and who would therefore spare no effort in giving their students the best in terms of French language education. As a rider to this, teachers may as well have their own grade of completion, which may be organised in collaboration with the CFTDs around. To this effect, the CFTD in Ibadan needs to be commended for having started something close to this; but more needs to be done.

Lastly, all hands should be on deck to ensure mass production of good quality audio instructional material for the practice of Dictation in particular, and for the practice of oral French in general (cf. Jimoh, 2005).

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