

UNIVERSITY OF CALABAR CALABAR, NIGERIA



THE CALABAR EDUCATOR JOURNAL

A Journal For Educational Researchers And Practitioners In Africa

APRIL 1986 ISSN 0189 - 7500 VOLUME THREE NO. 1

The Calabar Educator Journal, Vol. 3, No. 1, April, 1986, pp. 65 – 72.

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SOME PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE STUDENTS WILLINGNESS TO LEARN FRENCH.

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ABSTRACT

The very small number of students who are willing to offer French during the last two years of secondary school, coupled with poor performance in West African School Certificate (WASC) examination in the subject suggest the existence of a serious problem in the learning of French in secondary schools in Cross River State of Nigeria. To find out the psychological factors that underly this problem, survey data collected from 297 randomly sampled students were analysed using both the Pearson product-moment correlation analysis and the analysis of variance techniques.

The pattern of relationships observed supports existing related theories and results of previous studies with other populations on the place of attitude, motivation, interest, perceived ability and perceived subject difficulty in foreign language learning. The finding highlighted the importance of motivation in the learning of French as a third language and supported the suggestion of some means of motivating the learners.

PROBLEM AND BACKGROUND

Foreign language acquisition is an important educational problem, more especially if it is a third language. In an attempt to tackle this problem over the past two decades or so, attention has been focused on the learner as the central concern in the process of second language acquisition. The teacher is seen as being only essential but not always necessary for learning to take place. A recent survey of the teaching of French in Calabar municipality in Cross River State of Nigeria indicates that though some pre-primary or primary institutions include French in their curricula, the study of French commences seriously at the secondary level (Essien, 1983). But then, only very few students are willing to learn the language, and only a very small percentage of those who begin the study of French in their first year continue with it to the fourth and fifth years in secondary school. If after thirty years of introduction as a subject, very few learners are willing to learn it, and these, according to the survey, are showing very poor performance in the West African School Certificate (WASC) examination, there is bound to be some concern about the causes of such unwillingness.

Gagne (1965) groups factors necessary for effective learning into internal and external. While the former include such psychological variables as the learner's motivation, attitude, interest, previous knowledge and ability, the latter include human and material resources like teachers, books, and other facilities. The internal conditions are more fundamental and without them learning is not likely to take place even if the external ones exist. The problem of this study is to find out the influence of some of these inter-

nal factors on student's willingness to learn the French language.

Some learning theories have been advanced in attempt to explain the relationship between some of these internal factors and the learning process. One of these, which is on reinforcement, holds that reward and incentives motivate and increase the tendency to make correct response, and Smith (1975) found that it is the student's attitude that is the crucial factor in foreign-language acquisition, but that oftentimes students' attitude is ignored during teaching.

Studies by Duckworth and Entwistle (1974) and Cavanaugh (1977) show that interest in a given subject is an important internal factor which not only determines the level of willingness to learn the subject, but also enhances positive attitude towards it. In an investigation of the rationale behind students' choice of various school subjects in Britain, it was found that they were unwilling to offer French because of lack of interest in the subject (Duckworth and Entwistle, 1974). To them, the subject was not much social benefit. Gavanaugh (1977) found that interest influences the willingness to learn and initial successful interaction with the subject induces interest and strengthens willingness to learn it.

Motivation is another important ingredients in foreign-language acquisition. It is a state within a person that drives and energizes behaviour towards some goal. (Morgan, King and Robinson, 1979). Motivation enhances the willingness to act, and underlies success in any undertaking. Incentives are sources of motivation. Benowitz and Busse (1976), in assessing the effects of material incentives on the learning of spelling, found that children who received such incentives scored significantly higher on a spelling test than those who did not get them. Anticipated material reward from learning a subject provides motivation for the learning of that subject.

Related studies on the acquisition of French, which is a third language for Nigerians who study it, have not been done in Nigeria. Some of these internal determinants of students' willingness to learn might also significantly account for both the poor enrolment in French classess and the poor performance in the WASC examination in French by secondary school students in Cross River State. The identification of such factors might provide useful input into any effort by French teachers and institutions to solve these dual problems. This study is hypothesizing that in the population under study, there is a significant relationship between students' willingness to learn French and their: expressed interest in the subject; attitude toward the subject; level of motivation; level of agreement to an idea of making French a compulsory subject; perceived ability in the subject; and level of previous experience in French. And also that students' willingness to learn French depends significantly on their perceived difficulty of the subject.

METHODOLOGY

Cross River State is multilingual. Languages spoken include Ibibio, Annang and Efik. In addition to these, there are at least twenty-seven languages spoken in various parts of northern Cross River State. These include Ejagham, Bekwarra, Bette and others. The state uses: English as the official language of communication.

Sixty-six secondary schools in the state offer French at various levels. A directory of post-primary institutions in Cross River State - a document published by the Planning and Research Division of the Ministry of Education, Calabar, furnished the names and address of these institutions. Six schools were randomly selected from each of the five senatorial districts of the state, and the resulting sample included four boys', twelve

these schools, giving a total of three hundred subjects in the sample. In the schools where all the five classes are taught French, representative sampling was done from all of them. In schools where French is not taught in all the classes, subjects were sampled only from the classes where French is offered.

A fifty-item likert-type questionnaire with a five point scale was specifically developed and validated for this study. The questionnaire was divided into three sections - A to C. Section A contained nine items designed to collect mostly students' demographic data. Section B had seventeen items which measured the level of constraints posed by factors related to the learning of French, while Section C, containing twenty-four items, measured students' willingness to learn French, level of motivation, attitude towards French, and interest to learn the subject.

In Section B the response alternatives ranged from Not Very Serious (NVS) which carried one point, through Very Very Serious (VVS) which carried five points. Similarly, in Section C, five points were assigned to a Strongly Agree (SA) response and one point was given for a Strongly Disagree (SD) response to each statement in the questionnaire. Four, three, and two points were assigned to Agree (A), Not Sure (NS), and Disagree (D) responses respectively. Negatively worded items were scored in the reverse.

A pilot study was conducted to determine the reliability of the questionnaire. Thirty subjects, made up of five students randomly sample from one school each from the five senatorial districts in the state served as the validation sample. They completed the questionnaire the first time, and then again after an interval of twenty-four days. The results of the pilot study test (see Table I) showed moderate (.53) to high (.92) test-retest reliability indices for the variables involved in the study. Given the very small number of items used to elicit responses on each of these variables, these indices were regarded as good enough for the study.

TABLE I
Test-Retest Reliability Results (n = 30)

Variables	No. of items	Testing	X	SD	r
1. Willingness to learn French	4	1st 2nd	17.12 17.30	1.90 2.04	.92
2. Level of experience in French	4	1st 2nd	12.57 12.37	3.82 4.68	.88
3. Level of agreement with French as a compulsory WASC subject	2	1st 2nd	7.33 7.93	1.88 1.31	.87
4. Level of Motivation	8	1st 2nd	30.80 30.33	4.41 3.46	.88
5. Attitude towards French	5	1st 2nd	21.63 21.77	2.99 2.10	.53
6. Perceived ability in French Language	2	1st 2nd	3.33 3.33	1.40 1.35	.58
7. Expressed interest to learn French	5	1st 2nd	21.87 22.27	2.54 1.41	.62
8. Expressed level of subject Difficulty	2	1st 2nd	7.38 7.33	2.24 2.41	.87

The questionnaire were administered by the researcher to the subjects in their classroom. Talking between students was discouraged but questions to the administrator were encouraged to clarify instructions. A total of 297 questionnaires were completed and retrieved. This represents a return-rate of 99 per cent. The final sample consisted of 111 boys and 186 girls. Useful information was also got through discussion with French teachers in the schools used for the study.

ANALYSIS OF DATA AND RESULTS:

Six of the seven hypotheses were tested using the Pearson product-moment correlation analysis while the last one was tested using the one-way analysis of variance technique. A product-moment correlation analysis revealed that no significant relationship ($r = .09$, $df = 295$) exists between previous experience in French language and willingness to learn the subject (See Table II).

TABLE II
Inter-Variable Correlation Coefficient for Variables Related to Problems in Learning French

Variables	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1a	.09	.26**	.53**	.57**	-.21**	.56**	-.30**
2		.04	.39**	.15*	-.07	.10	-.18**
3			.31**	.19**	-.16**	.38**	-.25**
4				.37**	-.22**	.42**	-.24**
5					-.10	.63**	-.19**
6						-.24**	-.17**
7							-.21**

a Variables are numbered as named in Table I

* $P < .05$

** $P < .01$

Similar analysis between students' level of agreement with the idea of making French a compulsory school certificate subject and their willingness to learn French resulted in positive correlation coefficient value of $r = .26$ (see Table II). This was highly significant ($p < .001$) and led to the retention of the research hypothesis. Correlation analysis between students' level of motivation and willingness to learn French resulted in a co-efficient of $r = .53$ (see Table II). As this is highly significant ($p < .001$), the hypothesis of significant relationship between the two variables was not rejected.

To test for the hypothesis of the existence of a significant relationship between students' attitude towards, and willingness to learn French, a correlation analysis done showed a co-efficient of $r = .57$ (see Table II). This is highly significant ($p < .001$), thus retaining the research hypothesis. Similar analysis for students' interest in, and willingness to learn French resulted in a correlation co-efficient of $r = .56$ implying a significant ($p < .001$) relationship between the two variables. For students' perceived

ability in, and willingness to learn French, the correlation analysis resulted in a negative coefficient of $r = -.21$ which is significant ($p < .01$). This indicates a significant negative relationship between the two variables.

The hypothesis that students' willingness to learn French is significantly dependent on their expressed level of difficulty of the subject was tested using the analysis of variance (ANOVA) technique. Based on the total responses to items in the questionnaire which measured level of difficulty of French as a subject, the students were categorised into three mutually exclusive groups – those who view French as being of high, average, and low difficulty. The mean and standard deviation for each group's expressed willingness to learn French were calculated (see Table III). Then an analysis of the variability of this variable due to the differences in difficulty group was done. This analysis resulted in an F-ratio of 14.33, which, with 2, and 294 degrees of freedom, was seen to be highly significant ($p < .01$) (See Table III).

TABLE III
An Analysis of the Variability of Students' Willingness To Learn French Caused by the Differences in Their Expressed Level of Difficulty of the Subject

Level of Difficulty Group	n	Mean	SD
High	23	13.91	3.38
Average	166	15.76	3.28
Low	108	17.24	2.45

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F
Between (Difficulty Level) Group	268.94	2	134.47	14.83*
Within Group (Error)	2665.93	294	9.07	
Total	2934.87	296		

* $p < .01$

Of the seven research hypothesis considered in this study, six were retained while one was rejected. Willingness by students to learn French was seen not to be significantly related to the learners' previous experience with the language, but to be directly and significantly related to their: level of motivation; attitude towards the language, interest in the language; level of agreement with the idea of making French language a compulsory school certificate subject; inversely but significantly related to students perceived level of difficulty, and their perceived ability in the subject.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The willingness of students to learn the French language was seen to be significantly

related to many psychological factors. These are student's attitude to, motivation and interest in the French language. Based on the observed significant positive correlations of those variables with students' willingness to learn French, each of them has a direct and significant influences on it. These go to support related theoretical views and the results of previous empirical studies on the relationship between these variables and one's willingness to learn. As Jerman (1965) pointed out, "motivation is the strongest factor in learning a language." Motivation in a particular subject shapes the students interest and attitude towards the subject. The positive and highly significant relationship between interest in ($r = .42, p < .001$), and attitude to ($r = .37, p < .001$) the French language (see Table II) each with motivation in the language, coupled with the similarly high and significant positive relationship between motivation and willingness to learn the language ($r = .53, p < .001$) argues convincingly for the validity of Jerman's view in the case of French language in the population under study.

These significant inter-relationship imply that much could be done to solve some of the problems of learning French through appropriately influencing these variables that significantly relate to students' willingness to learn French. Most secondary school students in Cross River State do not learn French before secondary school. In their first year, French is one of the subjects that give them a feeling of having entered into a new situation. The very novelty of the language provides some motivation. They are happy, and show some willingness to learn the subject. They try to show off with the few French words and sentences picked up in class. By the second and third years, or motivation based on the novelty of the language dwindles, and if no other source of motivation replaces it, the students are likely to drop the subject by the fourth year. In the course of discussion with French teachers, one of them opined that outgoing students leave behind their disinterest in the subject, thus influencing successive generations of students to develop negative attitude toward it.

Another finding of this study indicates that there is no significant relationship between students' level of previous exposure to the French language, and their willingness to learn it in secondary school. Previous experience abets and encourages learning if, and only if, it was gainful and pleasant. May be those students who were previously exposed to the language either did not have successful experience with it, or did not see its usefulness and hence such experiences dampened or did not have any influence on their willingness to continue with it. These students have no opportunity to use the language outside the normal class period as they do their everyday communication in either their native language or in English. For them, French occupies the position of a dead language to be learnt forcibly only for academic purpose. Those who have been previously exposed to the language but have found no use for it might have lost the initial excitement at the beginning of secondary school, whereas the language might yet be exciting to the students who are just being exposed to it for the first time. Hence the level of the students' willingness to learn French might not necessarily depend on their level of previous exposure to the language.

The significant inter-relationships found between the students' level of willingness to learn French and their level of agreement with the idea of making French a compulsory subject ($r = .26, p < .01$); students' willingness to offer French and their perceived ability on the subject ($r = -.21, p < .01$); and their level of agreement to making French compulsory and their perceived ability in the subject ($r = -.16, p < .01$) highlight the source of an important problem to the learning of French in our schools. Students who think they are good in French would like to offer it if they are sufficiently motivated and given the opportunity, but actually they do not have enough motivation ($r = -.22, p < .01$) to want to offer it. This is because they tend to see French as being

materially less desirable than other competing subjects at which they might also be good. Since French is not a compulsory subject in the last two years of secondary school, it is usually scheduled against those other optional subjects on the school time table, so the good students prefer to go in for the more desirable subjects like physics, chemistry, etc., instead of French. But if French was made compulsory or/and given a separate slot on the time table, these students would have been given the opportunity to offer it. Opportunity for the students to learn French would be improved if related optional subjects, like languages could be scheduled together. This would enable students who is good in languages to offer one subject from that group without losing the chance of offering subjects from other groups.

The students' perceived level of difficulty of French as a subject significantly affects their level of willingness to learn it ($F = 14.83, df = 2, 294; p < .01$) and also relates significantly, but inversely to: the students' attitude towards the subject ($r = -.19, p < .01$); their interest in it ($r = -.21, p < .01$); and their level of motivation in the subject ($r = -.24, p < .01$) (See Table I). These imply that French is perceived to be more difficult by learners who lack motivation and interest in it, and have poor attitude towards it than by those who have high motivation, interest and good attitude towards it. Also the former set of learners are less and good attitude towards it. Also the former set of learners are less willing to learn the subject. A task tends to be more difficult when one has no interest in, and motivation for performing the task, or has poor attitude towards it. The probability of success in performing such a task is small under such conditions. The observed significant inter-relationships, between task difficulty, students' willingness, their motivation, interest and attitude, go to support these conditions in the case of French as a subject.

These serve to emphasize the importance of the influence of the affective in the cognitive development of the learner. The learner must be affectively prepared to accept and be willing to learn French before effective learning can take place. The knowledge of French would afford students many job opportunities. The Ministry of External Affairs, the banks, schools, international organizations and some other important establishments require employees who can speak French. Scientists, like Medical doctors and engineers need some reading knowledge of French. Opportunities for higher education and scholarships are available for students who study French. Students should be made aware of these opportunities, as these might motivate them and increase their willingness to learn French. The services of a guidance counsellor is very crucial here.

French is a third language to those Nigerian who study it, and much effort is necessary not only to attract and maintain the interest of the students, but also to ensure success at it. Many studies have been done on techniques and methods of teaching a second language, but not much has been done on these in the case of a third language. It is more demanding to ensure learning of French in Nigeria, than, say in Ivory Coast where it is a second language and a compulsory official medium of communication. For this reason, more resources must be committed to the teaching of French language in Nigeria. Studies should be done to find more effective ways of teaching French as a third language for which there is not much motivation to the learners. A lot of incentive should be made available to motivate the learners. Well equipped language laboratories with functional equipments and facilities such as can attract and maintain a learner's interest and translate this into willingness to learn are necessary. Teaching aids, like teaching machines, for individualized learning, could provide immediate feedback which can serve as motivation, to the learner. Programmed and graded lessons, which are designed to ensure success at each step, should be developed. Success at one step

provides an incentive for an attempt on the next. Adequate learning materials could arouse the learners' interest thus serving as an immediate classroom motivation. More emphasis should be laid on in-class conversation, the use of tape recorder, a series of phonograph records and an oral-aural method, and less use should be made of textbooks, grammatical analysis, rapid silent reading, and translation.

CONCLUSION

The very small number of students who are willing to register for French during the last two years of secondary school coupled with their poor performance in the WASC examination in the subject suggests the existence of a serious problem in the learning of French in secondary schools in Cross River State of Nigeria. Students' unwillingness to learn French, which, to them, is a third language, is the main problem that underlies this study. The study identified students' interest, level of motivation, attitude, perceived ability, their level of agreement with the idea of making French a compulsory subject and perceived subject difficulty as some psychological factors that significantly influence their willingness to learn French. Level of previous experience in French does not have a significant influence on students' willingness to learn French. Students tend to approach the learning of French with high level of willingness if, to them, the reward is highly attractive and if they perceive high likelihood of success. So students' willingness to learn French could be improved by influencing these factors that are found to relate significantly to it.

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