



## **Open Distance Learning and Foreign Languages: Challenges and Prospects of Learning French Language in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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### **Abstract**

The paper addresses the challenges of studying the French language in the Open Distance Learning System of Education, such as inadequate digital facilities for virtual classes. The fundamental objectives of this research work are to unveil the challenges of learning the French language in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and to project the prospects of studying French in the Open Distance Learning System of Education. Besides, the paper aims to present the French language as a viable tool for locating job opportunities in the global economy and the international labour market. We have adopted the analytic method. The method has helped us to unfold logically the challenges and relevance of studying the French language in the Open Distance Learning System of Education. The paper has adopted the cognitive theory of language which is focused on the ability of learners in language acquisition, sharp retentive memory and problem-solving skills. The theory fits in the present study since it is a mental process and a tool for repositioning the critical thinking of learners in the areas of morphology, syntax, semantics, phonetics and phonology. We have adopted the Communicative Teaching Language approach and Task-based Language Teaching Approach. The Task-based Language Teaching Approach is an activity-based approach that helps learners to be engaged in task-oriented activities for effective learning. We remark that the Open Distance Learning System of Education is a panacea to individual educational needs and national aspirations for diplomatic relations through the teaching of the French language since it is



an intellectual platform without barriers. The paper has contributed to knowledge by abridging the academic gaps of location, time and space in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

**Keywords:** French language, Open Distance Learning, 21<sup>st</sup>Century, Prospects

## **Introduction**

In our contemporary society, in-depth knowledge and understanding of the French language is a vehicle to cross borders, enhance our diplomatic relationship and locate job opportunities in the global labour market. Our individual or collective interest in the usage of the French language in the area of communication, health, international conferences, tourism peace and conflict resolution remains the global linguistic impact of the French language in human existence. Akese, M.(2022) states that the teaching and learning of the French language in Nigeria is a step towards national integration and globalisation. It is a response to universalism which has been favoured by the use of modern languages such as English, French, Spanish, Russian and Arabic. The French language pedagogy is therefore a booster of world programs initiated by the World Health Organisation (WHO) United Nations Children Education Funds (UNICEF), United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), Federation of International Football Association (FIFA) and The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

The overwhelming position of French Language communication in the world determines the worth and the value of French language education. The teaching and learning of French language attract the attention of the international communities. The French language is included in the curriculum of different countries in the world. The Anglophone countries in West Africa such as Nigeria, Ghana, Gambia, and Sierra Leon have legislated policies on the effective implementation of French language curriculum from primary to tertiary institutions. Christie O. Anyogo (2012:11) ascertains that “French is perhaps the second language, most widely spoken language in the World. It is spoken in over 70 countries of the world.”

A lot of people who are dislocated by some geographical and time factors, ignorance and misappropriation of priorities in the learning of the French language regret very often the loss of this great academic opportunity. To bridge the gap, a good number of people have taken a bold step to redeem this intellectual property through French Language Centres, Alliance Française and other centres for academic excellence such as Conventional Universities and Open Distance Learning Institutions.

Our preoccupation is the study of the French language in the Open Distance Learning System of Education, its Prospects and Challenges in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It is pertinent to know that the Open Distance Learning System has become an alternative to popular traditional, brick-and-mortar schools. The virtual schools are in no doubt a strong pillar of advocacy for learning in one's location and time. Pramumati, I. (2020) is of the opinion that in the Era of the Industrial Revolution, technology-based learning media known as e-learning are now becoming a trend in teaching and learning.

A generic definition of a Distance Learning Academic System entails a mode of learning where the organised learning content is delivered through various technological platforms and mediums for learners to explore. The system allows learners to participate actively in learning activities without necessarily being present in the traditionally organised face-to-face classes. It is imperative to know that course materials, lectures, interactive sessions, assignments, most examination questions like Multiple Choice Questions (MCQ) and feedback are delivered electronically through online platforms, email, videoconferencing or correspondence. It is designed to provide flexible and accessible learning opportunities and privileges for all categories of people who are constrained by some factors such as geographical dislocation, work schedules, family commitment or some physical challenges that are impedimental to their intentions to attend conventional academic systems. With this flexibility, learners explore the academic opportunities at their own disposal to complete their coursework at their own pace and convenience, provided there is internet connectivity. Eliot cited White (2003), distance education refers to the teaching and learning arrangement in which the learner and the teacher are separated by geography and time. Eliot considers Shelly's views (2020) where he defines



distance learning as an educational system in which learners can study in a flexible manner in their own time, at pace of their choice and without requiring face-to-face contact with a teacher.

We are confident that this paper will be a tool towards actualizing the possibilities of learning the dynamics of the French language in the Open Distance Learning System since it intends to expose facilitators to pragmatic and Task-Based Language Teaching approaches, communicative and functional methods of imparting French to the learner as well as the application of cognitive theories for retentive memory exercises and problem-solving skills.

**The problem of the research:** The problem of this research work is the challenges of studying the French language in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in the Open Distance Learning System of Education.

#### **The objective of the research**

The fundamental objective of this research work is to unveil the challenges of learning French language in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Besides, the paper aims at presenting the French language as a viable tool for locating job opportunities in the global economy and the international labour market.

#### **Methodology**

We have adopted the analytic method. The method will help us to unfold logically the challenges and relevance of studying the French language in the Open Distance Learning System of Education.

#### **Theoretical framework and approach**

The paper has adopted the cognitive theory of language which is focused on the ability of learners in the in-language acquisition, sharp retentive memory and problem-solving skills. The theory fits in the present study since it is a mental process and the learner is saddled with the responsibility of critical thinking in the area of morphology, syntax, semantics, phonetics and phonology. We have adopted the Communicative Teaching Language approach and Task-based Language Teaching Approach. The Task-based

Language Teaching Approach is an activity-based approach which helps learners to be engaged in task-oriented activities for effective learning.

### **Conceptual clarification**

**French language:** French language is the lingua franca as well as the official language of the French people. It is an international language that attracts premium for its usage in different spheres of life. It is a socio-psychological construct that is prone to communication. This entails that the French language is the social identity and the cultural heritage of the French people. It creates a bond of national unity in France. It is a mental process since It is a linguistic tool that helps us to reflect on issues that affect our social being and to express our emotions, sentiments, opinions and thoughts through interpersonal communication. It is a diplomatic language that has universal recognition in health, games and other socio-cultural activities. Anyogo (2012) stressed the fact that French as a language of international civilization and one of the prestigious global languages will open a door of opportunities as its benefits are growing every day in commerce, administration, technology, etc. The value attached to the French language has influenced a lot of people, nations and countries to embrace the French language as the language of dialogue and peacemaking. Ashiko (2003:54) ascertained:

The inability of the quasi-totality of our ruling class, our intellectual elite, our captains of industries, business and commerce, to express themselves in French is not only a big source of national embarrassment at the international level but has heightened the level of suspicion.

Open Distance Learning, in other ways virtual learning is a system of education that is online-based. It is embedded in the use of artificial intelligence gadgets such as computers, projectors, videotapes, prints, chats, CD-ROM, Email, zoom earphones and speakers to facilitate learning. It is a digital platform that is designed to help learners who are not necessary present in the traditional classroom for lectures. Open Distance Learning abridges the gap in learning where learners and facilitators are separated physically by the virtue of time and distance. This implies that both lecturers and learners don't meet in the physical classroom, but use digital platforms



like Zoom, videoconferencing and email to have classes. In this perspective, lecturers are saddled with the sole responsibility of facilitating learning through artificial classes at the most convenient time and pace for learners. Dangi (2019), with strong internet connectivity, students can learn English and French anywhere at any time in a flexible way. Eliots shares in the views of white (2003), that distance education refers to the teaching and learning arrangement in which the learner and the teacher are separated by geography and time.

Open Distance Learning offers sound academic opportunities to learners. The academic planners and facilitators consider the inadequacy of time on the part of the learner and as such, they allocate the most convenient and appropriate time to learners, outside their work schedule and other social political and economic engagement. In effect, online facilitating videos are recorded and uploaded to the learning platforms for proper acquisition of knowledge. The learning process becomes easier since recorded class videos are uploaded in line with the designated timetable

### **21<sup>st</sup> Century**

This is the current century which commenced in January 2021 and will end on December 2100. It is the 1st century of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium which is characterised by the rise of global economy and the 3<sup>rd</sup> world consumerism. Advanced countries like Britain, America, France, Russia, Germany, Japan and China are experiencing a rapid increase in their economic growth. The developing countries like Nigeria, Algeria, Ghana, Cameroon and a host of others are diminishing in their productive capacity, and as such an increased rate in their debt profile. The millennium encountered the global challenge of the Pandemic Coronavirus from its inception. The global effects of the Covid-19 pandemic are felt in almost all spheres of life. We experienced the closure of markets, churches, mosques, sports, schools and the imprisonment of human life. The closure of schools as a global effect of COVID-19 on education increases the need for Open Distance Learning Education in most countries of the world. The Century sparks off the economic challenges. Ahmed (2021), the COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching economic consequences including the Covid-19 recession, the second-largest global recession in recent history, decrease in business, in

the service sector during the COVID-19 lockdowns. There is also a decline in the stock market. Most countries are experiencing galloping inflation.

### **Challenges**

Challenges are problems or impedimental issues that hamper growth and development in human existence. The concept of challenges can also be looked upon as difficulties that encompass human actions and practices. Merriam-Webster definition considers challenges as an act of disputing what is considered to be unjust, invalid or outmoded. <https://www.merriam-webster.com>> It is a situation where there is a confrontation or issues that militate against the execution of policies. Dictionary.com explains the concept as something that by its nature or character saves as a call to battle, contest, or special effort. <https://www.dictionary.com>.

### **Prospects**

Prospects connote positivism. It is a possibility that something fabulous will happen. Merriam-Webster defines the concept of prospects as the expectation of a particular event, condition, a development of definite interest or concern. <https://www.merriam-webster.com>> This can also be referred to as benefits, opportunities and merits that can be derived from a task or an activity.

### **Learning French in a Distance Learning Program**

The distance learning program is the most convenient medium for the study of French as a foreign language by all categories of people. It abridges the gap of location, time and pace in the learning process. The learner has the privileges of studying French at any location, at his own convenient time and pace. It can be at his leisure time, at his less busy time in the office and shops, he may decide to play with the learning content on recorded audio and audiovisual tapes. French motivational songs, chats, playlet, interactive sessions are created in French language to enhance content delivery and acquisition of knowledge. Songs like Frère Jacques, Allouette gentile allouette, un drôle de restaurant, sur pont du Nord, Oh ! La! La! dans mon zoo, are all packaged on virtual learning platforms for the learner to explore.



Priority is given to learners in curriculum planning and execution. The content delivery of the French language is activity-based. French linguistic elements such as syntax, morphology, semantics, phonetics, phonology and textual analysis are well developed and uploaded to e-learning platforms for effective learning and actualisation of the intended learning outcome. A lot of activities like quizzes, rush questions and rush answers, puzzle exercises, epistler writings, simple composition and essay writings are learner-centred. The accomplishment of task-oriented activities enhances the pragmatic involvement and interactivity of French language learners on virtual learning platforms. Tabiri (2022) states that learners benefit a lot from the recorded videos after other self-engagement. At his convenient and designated time, facilitating videos are recorded and uploaded to the learning digital platforms. Since the recorded videos are based on a timetable and as such, learners have the opportunity of grasping the learning content of online courses at the appropriate time. This learning at one's pace in a distance learning program reduces academic stress. This conducive and flexible digital learning platform gives a new orientation to learners of the French language to engage in real-life language usage in various contexts.

The availability of smart technology offers easy access to lexical structures in the French language on digital learning platforms. Synonyms and antonyms, affixes and suffixes are developed in simple French language explanations to enrich the vocabulary of learners. The enrichment of the vocabularies is drawn from various fields of learning to equip the learner with a sound vocabulary for easy interaction in French language. The fields from which words are drawn to enrich the vocabulary of the French language learner not only constitute the wealth of intellectual experience of the learner but also create a cultural insight in the learner. In “moyen de transport” vélo et la bicyclette signify bicycle. La voiture et le taxi has a generic meaning of car. Similarly, Enseignant et professeur are commonly known as teacher. Vocabularies are derived from themes on topical issues of discourse in the French language. The development of Web-based French language learning media for users of the French language is instrumental to vocabulary enhancement for learners of French in the Distance learning program.

Facilitators assemble online resources, particularly the online language laboratory to engage learners in motivational communicative practices that will enhance oral expression and oral comprehension. Oral expression and oral comprehension activity-based intellectual packages are uploaded for learners to be engaged in spoken French through the act speech. Linguistic self-learning links which are embedded in songs and poems are planned to suit the organized learning content for flexible learning, learning French language without stress. Deng (2022), teachers regularly public learning links on the Chaoxiang Learning Platform, including daily French sentences and popular topics for students to learn independently. After the life classes, teachers set aside corresponding time, for students. After the students complete the self-learning task, the teacher will publish a rush-answer activity related to self-learning on the Chaoxiang Learning Platform. The rush answer carry activity sets learning point rewards. To a greater extent, online rush-answers stimulates the learners' interest and enthusiasm in French language digital laboratory activities.

Videoconferencing facilitates the learning of French language literature. Learners are exposed to different centuries of French literature and civilisation. Prose, theatre and poetry form the areas of interest in the academic pursuit of the learner in distance learning. Learners are exposed to video films of the medieval periods, which depict the dark ages of the French people and their metaphysical dispositions. French language learners in distance learning are exposed to theories and philosophies of life in a virtual classroom for the acquisition of knowledge. There is no doubt that through videoconferencing learners are exposed to the philosophy of existentialism by Jean-Paul-Sartre, The philosophy of the absurd by Albert Camus, the philosophy of self-commitment to duty by Antoine de Saint-Exupery, psycho-analytic theory by Freud and the host of others.

### **Challenges of learning French in a Distance Learning Program in the 21<sup>ST</sup> Century**

The are some impedimental issues that hamper the teaching and learning of the French language in the Distance Learning System of Education. These include among others the following:



**Digital illiteracy:** Most learners enrolled in Distance Learning are not sound in the knowledge of computers. Inadequate knowledge of digital operations diminishes the learning capacity. Unfortunately, most links for interactive sessions, particularly in the French language are dormant. Rizkya (2021) says it is so surprising to know that even students who attend a university that spearheads the adoption and adaptation of technology in teaching and learning find it difficult to sometimes use online/videoconferencing platforms, zoom and teams.

**Learning interference:** A lot of internet issues interfere with the learning process. E-commerce, pornography, world fashion and design, football and other associated games are competing with the learner's interest in learning. Many learners are easily distracted by the social media discussions. Due to this unnecessary distraction and competitiveness the intended learning outcome is partially archived, since the learners' commitment to the well-developed and uploaded activity-based program is very minimal. The learner therefore has a shallow and limited knowledge of the learning content.

**Inadequate digital learning facilities.** Digital facilities like computers, videos, CD-ROM, and Projector are grossly inadequate in most of the Distance Learning Study Centres. Some of the available gadgets are dysfunctional. The online laboratories are not properly equipped, thereby making language drills and skills of oral communication and oral expression very difficult.

**Limitations in internet connectivity.** The unstable internet network and the inability to connect to internet services usually slow down the pace of virtual learning activities in a Distance Learning System of Education. This is impedimental to the teaching and learning process of developed French-language content. In some locations, there is just no network service at all. Learners are sometimes compelled by this critical challenge to visit cybercafés to spend little time on their pedagogical activities. Besides, those who make efforts to visit their study centre libraries are overwhelmed by the chock of unstable poor networks. The learning of the French language in no-internet-locations hampers the effective utilisation of virtual learning programs.

**Poor quality of study modules:** In a situation where study modules lack content validity of the planned French language curriculum, learners stand the risk of not having a profound knowledge of the language in the four competencies of oral expression (O.E) and oral comprehension (O.C), written expression (W.E) and written comprehension (W.C).

**Poor learners support services to French language learners:** French language learners in digital learning are in a dilemma of poor learners support services by professional counsellors. Sometimes these services are skeletal, and as such learners are confounded.

### **Prospects of learning the French language in the Open Distance Learning Program in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

There are socio-political and economic reasons that are responsible for the study of French in the Open Distance Learning Education System. Some of the reasons Are derived from the national aspirations and needs of the country, while some are global.

**International labour market opportunities:** A good knowledge of the French language will increase the chances of potential French language learners to function and compete better in the international labour market and global economy. It is pertinent to note that international jobs require proficiency in at least one international language. The most preferable language is French, due to its global communicative effect in almost all spheres of life. The Catholic University of America publication indicates that in many European countries, a second language is introduced in primary schools and a third language in middle school. International job applicants who are proficient in at least two languages will be at a distinct advantage in the global market. When you understand French, your chances in the international labour market and global economy are very high. You can be part of the transactions occurring daily in French on every continent. It is imperative to note that airline companies, import and export companies, international seaports, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and telecommunications where France is recorded as the world leader are in need of applicants who are bilingual in international languages. We have also discovered from the publication that more than 1200 French companies have subsidiaries in the United States of America.



**Sports:** In the area of sports, the knowledge of French is instrumental to official communication and engagement building your communicative potential in this field of human endeavour will lead you to the overt benefits of world sports. The Catholic University of America stated that,

French is always an official language used to announce events, winners and medals at the Olympic games. In Canada, you can also follow hockey and baseball games in French. Automobile races (le Mans and Monte Carlo), horse racing (long champs) and tour de France engage fans around the globe. When you know French the International world of sports is open to you.

**Trans-cultural experiences:** Studying French in an Open Distance Learning System of education will increase your trans-cultural experience. The knowledge of French will help you to appreciate other people’s culture in the world. This leads to the harmonisation of our diverse cultural heritage and social identities for peaceful coexistence.

**Harnessing literary intellectual potential for nation-building:** The study of the French language will increase our intellectual potential abilities in the literary world. Theories and philosophies of so many French writers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Descartes, Alfred de Vigny, Antoine de Sainte-Exupéry and Freud have inspired so many people in the world. Sharing the compatible views of these great thinkers will give learners new orientations in thoughts, aspirations and conduct for nation-building.

**Conclusion:** The Open Distance Learning Education System is a panacea to individual educational needs and national aspirations for diplomatic relations. Being a digital learning platform that abridges the academic gaps of location, time and space in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Open Distance Learning is considered as the most convenient medium for the study of foreign languages, particularly, the French language. In spite of the challenges of Open Distance Learning, the system is activity-based and flexible to accommodate the needs of the learner in the study of the French language.

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