The Adult Learner of French in an Anglophone Setting

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Abstract
Unlike most other papers which are devoted to the discussion of the problems of normal French language teaching / learning in anglophone settings, this paper examines specifically the anglophone adult learner of French, his needs and objectives. The paper provides a brief history of the introduction of French into Africa, reflects on the beginnings and place of the language in Nigeria, particularly in the educational system and then goes on to identify adult French learner groups, their needs and objectives. The paper also discusses briefly the varieties of French and their implications for the anglophone adult learner and suggests French for communication, which is essentially oral, as the most appropriate variety of the language to be acquired by the adult leaner in an anglophone setting.
(Abstracted on www.ajol.org)

Methodological Preliminaries
It is today a widely accepted fact that the French language was first introduced into the West African sub-region, more precisely into Senegal, the first French African colony, in the 17th century, although it is claimed that French contact with the West African coast was much earlier than that (cf. J.D.Hargreaves (ed.) 1969, R. Mauny 1950 and J. Pouquet 1958; but for ease of reference see E.N. Kwofie 1985: 4-8, 1997: 41- 44 and 2004a).

The introduction of the French language into Africa as a whole is usually associated with the French colonial presence. However, whereas the language began to be used by French 'settlers' in Senegal from the time of the establishment of

trading posts in that country, in the first half of the 17th century, this was not the case of the other francophone African countries. The reason is that the French did not seem to have been keen on extending their commercial / political interests until after the Berlin Conference (1884) which settled the "partition of Africa," even though their penetration into Black Africa had begun as far back as 1842 (see Pouquet 1958:49). The three North African countries of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia present parallel examples of what happened in Black Africa (cf. E. N. Kwofie 1989: 59-60).

It must be observed then, though that seems obvious, that the French language was initially a foreign language in all the African countries where it was introduced until its status changed to that of second / official language through legislation. It is the historic event of the "partition of Africa" that created the dichotomy of francophone and anglophone blocs in Africa making each language the compulsory medium of education, hence of learning and teaching, of administration (that is the conduct of government business) and subsequently the preferred medium of literary creation, regardless of the fact that the Africans had their own native languages or mother tongues and that traditional non-formal education took place in those languages.

A great deal has been written about the differences in the language policies and administrative structures and styles of Britain and France as colonial powers and about the effects of those policies on the development of Africans in the colonies (see. A. I. Asiwaju 1976, C. Legum (ed.) 1965, and R.W. July 1970 for example).There was in 1980, that is almost a century after the partition of Africa, a yearbook dealing with the political economy of the whole of Black Africa country by country (i.e. for 48 countries) and another for the same year dealing with the armies and defence in Africa and the Middle East. In the area of education, the UNESCO Regional Bureau for Education in Africa and the UNICEF Regional Bureau for West and Central Africa jointly published in 1990 *Eduquer ou périr (Educate or Perish,* my translation*),* a collection of national contributions coordinated by Joseph Ki-Zerbo for the then planned UNESCO

World Conference on Education for All by 2000. The advantages and disadvantages of using foreign languages in education in Africa have also been frequently discussed (see for example E.Bokamba and J.Tlou 1977:35-53 and references). However there are no studies that present linguistic and sociolinguistic parallels between the anglophone and francophone blocs of Africa (but see E.N. Kwofie 2004a and 2004b).

My preoccupation in this essay is with the adult learner of French in an anglophone setting. Although there are many English-speaking African countries where adults learn French, I shall restrict my attention to Nigeria for convenience and greater relevance. It can however be assumed that much of the discussion on the Nigerian setting will also apply to the other English-speaking countries by reason of the comparability of or similarities in the sociolinguistic conditions under which French is generally learnt or acquired: the French language co-exists with or is in contact with many African languages, or is acquired or learnt in multilingual settings. The language is also not used as medium of education or for general communication or everyday life, although it may serve as a medium of instruction at the university level.

Now, every natural or human language is acquired either from childhood or in adulthood in one or the other of two settings described as formal and informal. However, these two settings are not necessarily mutually exclusive. For example, every child begins to acquire his or her mother tongue naturally, that is within the family without any formal instruction or teaching, but may later in life complement that learning in school with the help of teachers of that language and appropriate textbooks. Whereas the natural /informal mode generally characterizes mother tongue or first language acquisition, the formal / school setting is where foreign language learning usually takes place. Considering then the fact that French is a "foreign" language and that its learning in Nigeria involves both school children and adults, there is need to identify the various categories of adult learners for the purposes of the present discussion. I shall also try to determine the needs and objectives of the categories as the appropriate types or varieties of French

to teach or propose for learning can be defined only in terms of learners' needs and objectives. An attempt will be made to discuss the challenges that adult learners are likely to face as well as appropriate recommendations for meeting those challenges. But before I undertake a discussion of the issues mentioned earlier, I will briefly reflect on the beginnings and status of French in Nigeria as that will help to provide a clearer and more coherent picture of the language in the country.

Reflections on the Beginnings and Place of the French Language in Nigeria

Until the change of its status to that of "second language" in 1996 during the military regime of the Late General Sani Abacha, French was a foreign language, therefore an optional school subject the acquisition of which depended mainly on the interest and choice of the student. The optional nature of French in the school curriculum and the insufficient recognition of the general educational value and usefulness of the language in the country's external relations would seem to be the main explanation of the deplorable fact that the premier university of Nigeria, the University of Ibadan, which was established in the late 1940s, produced its first and only graduate of French only in 1965, compared with 12 produced by the University of Ghana in the same year. Since that graduate had entered the university with an A-level pass in French along with other subjects, it is conceivable that the language had been introduced into the Nigerian secondary school curriculum in the late 1950s. Consequently the French language can be said to have been in existence in the country for some fifty years, significantly before the country's independence in 1960. It is noteworthy that Nigeria today boasts of some thirty full professors of French, specialists in the diverse areas of French studies, while Ghana has less than ten full professors!

If before 1996, the date of the official declaration of French as a second language in Nigeria, interest in the language and the desire to learn it had been so low as to have dampened the enthusiasm or discouraged teachers of the language in the country, that obviously has not been the case for about a decade

or so now. This is because the need for a knowledge of French by individuals as well as official interest have for some time been more clearly seen to be tied up with the demands of globalization, the need for human development through education and methods of poverty reduction. In the area of higher education for example, the National Universities Commission's requirement that the French language be taught in all universities, and this requirement presupposes a parallel compulsory teaching of the language in secondary schools, means that Nigerians in their hundreds must endeavour to acquire a knowledge of the language. Therefore, if it was not every Nigerian that needed French as was widely recognized or thought in the 1970s, at least those who are in educational institutions as well as those who want to partake of "world culture," engage in international business, or participate in "global politics" in the 21st century must learn the language. It cannot be overemphasized that French is incontestably one of the most widely used languages in the world and an important medium of international communication, interaction and diplomacy.

Since its adoption in the Nigerian educational system the French language has been learnt and continues to be learnt by people from diverse socio-cultural or ethnolinguistic backgrounds, of different ages and at different levels of the educational system, that is from primary school to university. It is therefore necessary to specify the groups of people who qualify as "adult learners" of French and thus constitute the focus of the present discussion. The pertinent question here then is "Who is an adult?"

According to the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1984:13), the word **adult** means "a fully grown person or animal, especially a person over an age stated by law, usually 18 or 21." The defining age of adulthood tends however to vary in many African including Nigerian communities as quite often factors like culture, religion and physical features enter into play or influence perceptions. This variability would seem to be implied in the 'developmental' nature or 'ambiguity' of the dictionary definition cited above. However, considering the fact

5

that the legal age for voting in Nigeria is 18 years and that every normal Nigerian is regarded at that age as "a responsible human being", as "having come of age", and therefore "liable under the laws of the land," any Nigerian aged 18 years and above who is learning French can be described as "an adult learner of French." But we know that the French language is also taught to or learnt by Nigerians below 18 years. The question of identifying the relevant adult learner groups therefore arises. What are the groups, their likely interests / objectives and needs?

Adult French Learner Groups, Needs and Objectives
Learner Groups Identified
As was earlier observed, language learning occurs generally in two main settings, formal and informal. French is acquired in Nigeria principally in formal settings: secondary schools, colleges of education, polytechnics and universities and, interestingly for some time now, primary schools. The learning of French by illiterate or uneducated adults outside the educational system would seem to be inconceivable or rare in the absence of compelling socio-economic circumstances, more specifically in view of the fact that the language is not required for everyday communication by Nigerians. Learning of French by illiterate adult Nigerians is therefore excluded from the present discussion. Excluded also is French language learning in primary and junior secondary schools because learners at these levels are generally children, adolescents or below 18 years. The following then are the groups that may be identified as adult learners, actual and potential:

1. Learners of French in the higher classes of secondary schools: it is assumed that this group will not be very large since most learners aged 18 years would have already taken their school leaving certificate examinations and would be looking forward to going on to the next level of their education or doing something else, personal ambitions being naturally variable.
2. The second group of learners is made up of those aged 18 years and above who either failed French along with some

other subjects in their school examinations and would like to continue with the language as a result of their future plans or ambitions. With this group may be identified those with one qualification or another in French who want to make the language their career or else use it in their career because of the prospects that it offers.

3. This group of learners of French is heterogeneous: it is made up of those in institutions of higher learning who, as observed above, must compulsorily learn the language because it has now become an educational requirement. Some of the learners in this category are either 'specializing' in French therefore learning it by choice, in other words they are striving to acquire a degree in French, or are studying for a first degree in disciplines like English, Accounting, Business Administration, Science, Engineering Sciences among others. Some of these learners are interestingly under 18 years, while many others are well above that age. Whatever the case may be, French language learning classes are mixed and there are generally no age distinctions from the point of view of teaching methods and textbook usage. It must be remarked here also that whereas some of the learners had contact with the French language in secondary school, had tried to seriously learn it, but had had to abandon the effort for one reason or another, others are complete beginners, that is they have no knowledge at all of French.

4. This group of learners, the fourth that we may identify, is made up of those who can be considered as professionals, graduates of diverse disciplines including university lecturers or academics, civil servants, business executives among others who require a knowledge of French for a variety of reasons. While the setting in which learning takes place is usually formal, in the sense that many of such learners register for French as a language requirement, therefore compulsorily within the higher degree programme that they are pursuing, others endeavour to acquire, by choice or out of interest, such knowledge in 'semi-formal' settings, such as engaging fluent speakers of French using the few sentences or words they know in unorganized and

occasional short exchanges punctuated with questions as to the correctness of their productions. Some of the professionals also use a variety of self-instructional materials such as CD-ROMs, radio lessons, etc.

As it can be inferred from the foregoing presentation, a strict categorization of adult learners in the fourth group appears difficult. Indeed, any attempt to discuss adult language education outside the formal context or setting would be essentially speculative because the informal setting is generally unorganized. For practical purposes or for the convenience of the present discussion, the third and fourth groups may be merged. Notice that what separates some of the learners of the third group from those of the fourth group who are pursuing higher degrees in disciplines other than French is what I may, for want of a better term, describe as **the level of professionalization.**

Needs and Objectives of Adult Learners
Language is generally considered as man's primary or most important means of communication. It exists in two main forms: spoken or oral and written. Communication may thus be oral or written. However, while all human languages are spoken not all are written. French exists in the two forms. A learner of French may wish to acquire only a reading knowledge of French or knowledge of written French especially for research purposes or knowledge of both oral / spoken and written French. The type of French that a learner chooses to acquire will therefore normally be determined by his / her needs and objectives. And yet such needs and objectives tend to be identified or fixed not by the learner but by the organizers or designers of the language programme or course materials especially where the setting is formal. This is to suggest that in the educational system the importance or the role of learners' centres of interest, needs and objectives in the designing of the language course text for use or type of language to be learnt tends to be neglected or is generally overlooked. This leads quite often to the feeling on the part of learners that the French language course is "uninteresting", "boring" or "inappropriate". And yet the analysis of individual

adult learners' needs and the factors determining language choice including motivation for language acquisition is clearly impossible. The lack of needs analysis prior to textbook design would seem to explain in part the multiplicity and inappropriateness of many of the French language texts in the Nigerian educational system. There are, for example, many textbooks which are designed for beginners in secondary schools but which are also used in teaching professional students at the university level, while others, said to be designed for university students pursuing professional courses, differ from the 'beginning' secondary school textbooks only by the inclusion of scores of lexical items seen by their designers to be relevant to the needs of the target adult learners. Given the complexity of the French language teaching and learning situation as it affects adult Nigerians, the pertinent questions that need to be answered seem to be the following: What are the expectations or likely objectives and needs of the average Nigerian adult learner of French? What are the appropriate types or varieties of French that must be recommended for the identified groups of adult learners?

The Adult Learner Groups and the Varieties of French to Acquire

Four groups of adult learners were earlier identified. None of the groups was seen to be completely homogeneous. It was suggested that some of the learners from the third and fourth groups could be put together, the only difference between learners of the two groups being that of degree or level of professionalization. In fact, it is conceivable from "a pragmatic point of view" that few adult learners in an educational institution who feel forced to learn French because it is an educational / graduating requirement, would learn it for its own sake, that is without being concerned principally with passing the attendant examination. Passing the French language examination tends to be in fact the main preoccupation or objective of those learners who generally consider French language learning as "a necessary evil", even though the desire to be able to speak the language on the part of some of them, after the first few

introductory lessons, especially when the teacher makes them interesting, cannot be completely ruled out. The type or variety of French that may be proposed or recommended for this category of learners should be essentially oral, the type on which learners can build, if they wish, even after the duration of the compulsory language course. This type of French may be described as **essentially oral** or **French for communication**. The nature of this variety of French will be discussed further on.

For the purposes of the present discussion, two sub-groups of learners may still be identified within the fourth group of adult learners: namely those desiring to make French their career and therefore 'specializing' in it and those who are professionals of fields other than French who desire not only the ability to speak the language but also a reading ability, that is the ability to access knowledge available in French in their professions. The type of French required by the first sub-group of adult learners, who may also be described as "French or French related professionals", can be labelled here as **comprehensive French. T**his type of French when acquired should enable the learner to use the language appropriately in "all communication situations" because he / she will have at least been made aware of and will have become reasonably proficient in the use of the major types and forms of the language generally available to native speakers of French and other Francophones. Whether the 'complete' acquisition of this 'idealized' type of French during a university degree programme is possible or perfection in its use is attainable are questions that cannot but be left open here. The variety of French required by the second sub-group of adult learners will also be **oral, essentially oral but with a professional bias**. These two varieties of French will be examined further in relation to some of the varieties of French identified by scholars or mentioned in the literature.

The Varieties of French and Anglophone Adult Learners
It is a well known fact that like any other living language French exists in various forms.

Apart from the oral and written forms such distinctions as common, central, neutral, standard, regional, literary, popular,

familiar and technical French are also made (See E. N. Kwofie 1997:14-39). It is not necessary to undertake a detailed discussion here of the different characterizations of the varieties, dialects, registers and or styles of the language. It will suffice, in illustration of the difficulties that arise in the identification or description of the varieties of the language and subsequently in the choice of the variety of French to teach, to simply recall here two contrasting viewpoints. A. Martinet for example recognizes "two broad classes of usages" (presented in the French original by G. Mounin (1975:162) but translated below into English by me) as follows:

> *...two broad classes of usages: one is official French either written (especially technical and scientific) or spoken (magisterial lectures, discourses, conference, pleading a legal cause, etc.), the other is all the spoken usages which vary with the great diversity of situations (*geographical*, social, family, school, etc.)*

A. Valdman (1976: 19) on the other hand, observes as follows:

> *Intersecting with regional varieties of Standard French are variations in speech correlating with social status. From a sociolinguistic point of view one may identify two varieties of Standard French: one characteristic of middle class speakers and the other of the working and lower classes. The former will be referred to as bon usage and the latter as français populaire (...). It is more realistic to consider bon usage and français populaire as two idealized polar varieties of standard French. Français populaire is a less elaborated form of standard French whose normal means of expression is the spoken language. On the other hand, bon usage is marked by numerous redundant features whose presence in written texts may be considered equivalent to the features of sentence*

11

*organization and semantic distinctions signaled
in speech by changes in intonation and other
prosodic phenomena.*

If one accepts Martinet's view on the ground of 'descriptive simplicity', the question of its 'descriptive adequacy' remains. It may be observed for example that official French exists in written and spoken forms; that these forms quite often overlap or may not be easily distinguished in a number of situations. Written French for example in the form of a 'technical' or 'scientific' report may be presented orally at a conference while a magisterial lecture though delivered orally is usually written. Alternatively, we may say that official French can be both written and spoken while all other forms of French described as 'spoken' are essentially oral but may also be written as happens in literature in the form of 'speech representation'-dialogues. But what are the distinctive features of the 'classes of usages' identified? It is important to observe that since the French language is at present used by some 300 million people around the world, and since it has 24 regional varieties including 'a so-called African variety', the types of French that may be recommended to our two main Anglophone adult learner groups as identified above are those that will facilitate normal oral and written communication and will also permit easy interaction with fellow professionals independently of their ethnolinguistic or geographical origin. These types are those described above as **comprehensive French** and **French for communication** (the professional slant or bias being presumed here). The distinctions of *bon usage(*'good'usage*)* and *français populaire* (popular French) made by Valdman may be accommodated in these two major types of French, although popular French seems to vary from one geographical setting to another (cf. P. Guiraud 1969; 1968 and F. Gadet 1992 and 1997)

Comprehensive French* and *French for Communication
It may be observed that traditionally the type of French aimed at in the Nigerian school system has been French for understanding, information and communication (cf. for example

12

C.M.B Brann 1977). Since the main function of every language is that of communication and since communication is impossible without information and understanding, the demands of globalization make the acquisition of French for communication more pressing today.

Ideally, the adult Nigerian who is learning French in order to make a career in it would wish to acquire the type that I have labelled above as comprehensive French. Comprehensive French would "analytically" include French for communication less those aspects of the language that are seen to be overtly profession - related, and are thus technical, scientific, 'specialized'. Differently expressed, comprehensive French may be characterized abstractly as neutral, central, common and standard, the average of all actual uses of the language excluding uses that are idiosyncratic or idiolectal, or dialectal that is are the 'preserve of specific groups of people', "jargons" as some would say. It may be observed that the excluded uses have the common characteristic of hampering or impeding intercomprehension among Francophones of diverse ethnolinguistic backgrounds. This type of French may be identified with what is common to reference grammar books and dictionaries of French (cf. for example E. N. Kwofie 1985:40-65; 66-91 and 2004: 59-124). In more concrete terms or by way of illustration, comprehensive French would include such aspects of the language as cover greetings, introduction of self and others and thus permit the description of professions, nationalities, family, accommodation, time, seasons, meals of the day, daily life among others. It will be impossible to list here all the centres of interest of learners around which learning ought to be organized, but for a structured presentation of the few "conceptual / semantic fields" identified in illustration, such aspects of French grammar as interrogation, affirmation or declaration, demonstrative and possessive adjectives and pronouns, and various sentence structures considered as basic by French grammarians need to be introduced by designers of pedagogical materials.

It must be pointed out however, that if comprehensive French has been assumed to exist in principle as I have suggested, the reality would seem to be otherwise. This is not

only because language texts generally vary in quality by reason of the relativity of the linguistic competence and professional experience of designers but also because of the application of such criteria as utility, frequency, appropriateness, selection, gradation, the objectives of the text designer and of the target audience. Since the lexicon of the French language, like other languages, is "open-ended" in the sense that it contains several thousands of words or lexical items and yet keeps on adding more because it will die if it remains static, there must be selection of elements for pedagogical purposes. Comprehensive French strictly speaking then is an idealized variety of French. The type of language that the French graduate will have acquired at the end of his / her studies at the university is generally heterogeneous because of his / her exposure to different kinds of written texts. But as can be imagined, completeness of the learning of French as of any other language in four or even five years would seem to be utopian. It is only the ideal speaker-listener who can be credited with a 'perfect' knowledge of his language. In every foreign language learning setting, 'debilitative' factors like memory limitations, hesitation phenomena, linguistic interference, etc. cannot be conjured away, although 'admirable mastery' of the foreign language is attainable. Besides, linguistic competence is variable.

French for communication, an essentially oral French, on the other hand, may be considered as a 'derivative' of common French and therefore akin in a sense to a part of the French graduate's language (which is however difficult to specify). French for communication differs however by the linguistic specificities of the professions to which learners belong on the one hand and by the assumed comprehensiveness of the French graduate's language on the other hand. The assumption here also is that the professions of learners will have been linguistically adequately catered for in the texts selected for use. Despite the obvious difficulties that arise in the 'feature specification' of this type of French, it must include among other features the laconic and elliptical responses to questions that are known to normally characterize spoken language. However, this type of language must for educational reasons, or acceptable

14

'international communication' exclude all that can bring it close to "pidgin" French (see P. O. Alo 2000: 158 – 166).

Conclusion

In the preceding pages, I tried to identify groups of adult learners of French and their needs. Attention was inevitably restricted to adults in educational institutions. However, it was not possible to strictly categorize the groups and unequivocally identify or specify the types of French likely to meet or satisfy the needs of the various learners. The possibility of the uneducated Anglophone adult learning French, in whatever form, for communication within the West African sub–region was also considered remote and therefore excluded from the discussion. 'Institutionalized' life-long learning is a 'human right' and every body has a right to study whatever subject he / she desires provided the opportunity is offered. The learning of French by the uneducated adult Nigerian is at present non-existent and can be conceived of only when the language becomes an indispensable means of communication in the country. Such a prospect seems distant in view of the multilingualism or linguistic diversity of the country, the high level of illiteracy and the factor of language loyalty. It is however conceivable that many more educated Nigerians will feel encouraged to learn the language essentially for communication given the "demographic weight' and educational value of the language not only in West Africa but also in the rest of the world.

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