Assessing Oral Proficiency of 400-Level French Learners at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria: Challenges, Strategies and Interventions

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Abstract

This paper evaluates the oral proficiency of 400-level learners of French at ABU Zaria, highlighting the challenges faced by students in their oral practice. Through a comprehensive review of existing literature, the study identifies key obstacles in achieving oral fluency. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research integrates a survey on strategies and the use of online resources, alongside direct classroom observations and an oral expression exercise. The latter is assessed using criteria derived from the CEFL(Common European Framework for Languages) DELF (Diplômed'études de la langue française)exams assessment grids. Results are meticulously analyzed, leading to targeted recommendations for enhancing oral proficiency among learners

Keywords: Oral proficiency, strategies , self assessment, online resources, ,CEFR, DELF

Introduction

The proficiency in oral communication is a pivotal component of language learning, particularly in acquiring a foreign language such as French. For 400-level learners at Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) Zaria, mastering oral proficiency is essential not only for academic success but also for practical communication in diverse professional and social contexts. Despite its importance, students frequently encounter significant challenges in achieving fluency and confidence in spoken French.

This paper aims to evaluate the oral proficiency of these advanced learners, identifying the specific obstacles they face and proposing actionable strategies for improvement. Through a mixed-methods approach, the study combines quantitative data from surveys on learning strategies and the utilization of online resources with qualitative insights from direct

classroom observations. These observations include an oral expression exercise, rigorously assessed using the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and Diplômed'Étudesen Langue Française (DELF) assessment grids.

By critically analyzing the results, this research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the current state of oral proficiency among ABU Zaria's French learners. The findings will inform practical recommendations aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of oral French instruction, ultimately fostering better communication skills among students.

Literature Review

Oral proficiency in a foreign language involves several sub-skills, including pronunciation, fluency, accuracy, and the ability to use language appropriately in different contexts (Bygate, 1987; Council of Europe, 2001). Common challenges in developing oral proficiency include lack of exposure to the target language, anxiety, and limited opportunities for practice (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Gardner & Lambert, 1972).

General Problems Encountered by Learners of French

Learners of French face numerous challenges that impede their progress in acquiring oral proficiency. One prominent issue is pronunciation difficulties. According to Tranel (1987), French phonetics can be particularly challenging for non-native speakers due to its unique sound system and pronunciation rules that differ significantly from those of many other languages. These pronunciation issues can hinder effective communication and reduce learners' confidence.

Grammar complexity is another significant hurdle. Posner (1996) highlights that the intricacies of French grammar, with its numerous rules and exceptions, can be overwhelming for learners. The complexity of verb conjugations, gender agreements, and sentence structures often leads to frequent errors, which can be discouraging for students striving for fluency.

A major barrier to achieving oral proficiency is the lack of practice opportunities. Kinginger (2008) emphasizes that consistent and meaningful practice is essential for language acquisition. However, many learners do not have sufficient opportunities to practice speaking

French in real-life contexts, limiting their ability to develop fluency and spontaneity in the language.

Lack of confidence is another critical issue. Horowitz and Horowitz (1986) argue that many language learners experience anxiety and self-doubt when speaking in a foreign language. This lack of confidence can prevent them from actively participating in conversations and taking risks necessary for language improvement.

Cultural nuances also pose challenges for French learners. Porcher (1995) notes that understanding and appropriately using cultural references and idiomatic expressions are crucial for effective communication. Learners who are not familiar with the cultural context of the language may struggle to fully grasp the meaning of certain phrases and may inadvertently use them inappropriately.

Specific Problems Encountered by Learners of French in Nigeria

In the Nigerian context, learners of French face additional challenges that further complicate their language acquisition process. Pronunciation issues are prevalent, as noted by Iji (2013), who explains that the phonetic differences between French and Nigerian indigenous languages can cause significant pronunciation difficulties for learners.

Limited vocabulary is another common problem. Anjorin (2005) points out that many Nigerian learners of French have a restricted vocabulary, which hampers their ability to express themselves effectively. This limitation often results from insufficient exposure to the language and inadequate practice in diverse contexts.

Inadequate practice is a pervasive issue. Ogundele (2015) highlights that the educational system in Nigeria often does not provide enough opportunities for learners to practice speaking French regularly. This lack of practice inhibits the development of oral proficiency and prevents learners from becoming confident and fluent speakers.

Lack of exposure to the French language and culture is another significant barrier. Eniola (2009) argues that many Nigerian learners do not have enough exposure to authentic French language use, which is crucial for developing a deeper understanding and appreciation

of the language. This lack of exposure can lead to a superficial understanding of French and limit learners' ability to use it effectively in real-life situations.

Fear of making mistakes is a common issue among Nigerian learners of French. Olarewaju (2010) observes that many students are afraid of making errors when speaking French, which can prevent them from actively participating in conversations and practicing their speaking skills. This fear is often exacerbated by a lack of supportive and encouraging learning environments.

Grammar and syntax errors are also prevalent. Akinloye (2007) explains that Nigerian learners frequently struggle with the complexities of French grammar and syntax, leading to numerous errors in their spoken language. These errors can hinder communication and reduce the overall effectiveness of language use.

Cultural differences further complicate language learning for Nigerian students. Bamidele (2014) notes that the cultural differences between Nigeria and French-speaking countries can create misunderstandings and miscommunications. Understanding and navigating these cultural differences is essential for effective language use and for achieving a high level of oral proficiency.

The literature highlights a range of challenges faced by learners of French, both generally and specifically within the Nigerian context. Pronunciation difficulties, grammar complexity, lack of practice opportunities, lack of confidence, and cultural nuances are significant obstacles that impede learners' progress. In Nigeria, additional issues such as limited vocabulary, inadequate practice, lack of exposure, fear of making mistakes, grammar and syntax errors, and cultural differences further complicate the language acquisition process. Addressing these challenges through targeted interventions and supportive learning environments is crucial for enhancing the oral proficiency of French learners at Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) Zaria and beyond.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to evaluate the oral proficiency of 400-level French learners at Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) Zaria. The methods include a survey, direct classroom observations, and a speaking exercise. This combination provides a comprehensive understanding of the learners' challenges and proficiency levels

Participants

Twenty-two (22) learners enrolled in the Oral French class participated in this study. The participants were selected to provide a representative sample of advanced French learners at ABU Zaria.

Data Collection

Survey: The survey aimed to gather data on the learners' strategies for improving oral proficiency and their use of online resources. The survey was conducted over two class sessions. In the first session, participants completed a questionnaire that assessed their learning strategies, frequency of practice, and use of digital tools.

Direct Observation and Speaking Exercise: The second session involved a direct classroom observation where students participated in an oral expression exercise. This exercise required students to engage in spontaneous speech on assigned topics. Their performances were evaluated based on criteria derived from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and the Diplôme d'Études en Langue Française (DELF) assessment grids.

Data Analysis

Questionnaire Analysis: The responses to the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics. This analysis helped in identifying common strategies, frequency of use, and the perceived effectiveness of online resources among the learners.

Oral Practice Evaluation: The scores from the oral practice exercise were analyzed according to various criteria, including fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, vocabulary, and overall communicative competence. Each student's performance was graded using the CEFR and DELF descriptors, providing a detailed assessment of their oral proficiency.

Procedures

Survey Administration:

In the first session, learners completed the questionnaire. The survey included questions on learning strategies, frequency of practice, and the use of online resources. In the second session, the speaking exercise was conducted. Learners were given topics to discuss spontaneously being observed and evaluated.

Direct Observation and Grading:

During the speaking exercise, instructors observed and took notes on each student's performance. The performances were then graded according to the CEFR and DELF criteria, focusing on fluency, accuracy, confidence, pronunciation, vocabulary, and overall communicative competence.

Data Analysis:

The questionnaire data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify trends and common practices among the learners. The scores from the oral practice were analyzed to evaluate the learners' proficiency levels across different criteria. This methodology provides a comprehensive evaluation of the oral proficiency of French learners at ABU Zaria, highlighting areas for improvement and informing targeted strategies for enhancing language instruction.

Descriptive Statistics from the Questionnaire

The questionnaire on oral proficiency among 400-level French learners at Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) Zaria provided valuable insights into various aspects of their language learning experiences. The questionnaire was divided into four sections: Oral Proficiency, Self-Assessment, Strategies, and Use of Online Applications and Resources. Each section was rated on a Likhert scale of 1 to 4, where 4 represents the highest level of agreement or proficiency and 1 represents the lowest.

Table 1: Classifications of the respondents by age ranges.

Age ranges of respondents	Frequency	Percent
18-20years	1	4.5
21-22years	1	4.5
23-24years	6	27.3
25-27years	5	22.7
28 years and above	9	40.9
Total	22	100.0

Table 2: Classifications of the respondents by type of gender.

Type of gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	6	27.3
Female	16	72.7
Total	22	100.0

Table 3: Opinions of the respondents on the oral proficiency (Section 1)

Sn		AL		ST		R		N		
		F.	%	F.	%	F.	%	F.	%	Me
1	I can introduce myself and others in French providing basic personal information	9	40.9	7	31.8	6	27.3	0	0	3.1
2	I can maintain a conversation on topics that familiar or personal interest	2	9.1	9	40.9	8	36.4	3	13.6	2.4
3	I can narrate a story or describe events in a simple coherent manner	2	9.1	7	31.8	10	45.5	3	13.6	2.3
4	I can explain why I have certain preferences or opinions in French	3	13.6	9	40.9	8	36.4	2	9.1	2.5
5	I can handle most situations likely to arise when travelling in a French speaking area	1	4.5	8	36.4	10	45.5	3	13.6	2.3

1. Never 2. Rarely 3. Sometimes 4. Always

Table 4: Opinions of the respondents on the self-assessment (Section 2)

Sn		A		ST		R		N		Me
		F.	%	F.	%	F.	%	F.	%	
1	I feel confident speaking French in everyday situation	5	22.7	5	22.7	11	50.0	1	4.5	2.6
2	I feel my pronunciation in French is generally clear and understandable to others	2	9.1	5	22.7	11	50.0	4	18.2	2.2
3	I have enough vocabulary to express myself on topics related to my interests and everyday life	0	0	10	45.5	9	40.9	3	13.6	2.3
4	I can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest	2	9.1	9	40.9	9	40.9	2	9.1	2.5
5	I can understand main points of clear standard speech on familiar matters regularly encounter in work, school leisure	3	13.6	13	59.1	4	18.2	2	9.1	2.7

1. Never 2. Rarely 3. Sometimes 4. Always

Table 5: Opinions of the respondents on the strategies for oral French (Section 3)

Sn		A		ST		R		N		Me
		F.	%	F.	%	F.	%	F.	%	
1	I regularly engage in conversations in French with classmates or native speakers	2	9.1	5	22.7	12	54.5	3	13.6	2.2
2	I take notes of new vocabulary and expressions while practicing French	4	18.2	7	31.8	11	50.0	0	0	2.6
3	I use audio materials to improve my listening comprehension	6	27.3	4	18.2	9	40.9	3	13.6	2.5
4	I participate in French speaking clubs or join conversation groups to practice speaking	2	9.1	3	13.6	13	59.1	4	18.2	2.1
5	I seek out opportunities to practices speaking French outside of the classroom setting	5	22.7	2	9.1	10	45.5	5	22.7	2.3

1. Never 2. Rarely 3. Sometimes 4. Always

Table 6: Opinions of the respondents on the online resources (Section 4)

Sn		A		ST		R		N		Me
		F.	%	F.	%	F.	%	F.	%	
1	I engage with French social media social media, (Facebook groups/Instagram etc.) to immerse my in the language	5	22.7	6	27.3	8	36.4	3	13.6	2.5
2	I watch French videos (ex YOU-TUBE educational websites) to enhance my understanding and speaking abilities	4	18.2	8	36.4	10	45.5	0	0	2.7
3	I follow online courses or tutorials to improve my oral proficiency	3	13.6	3	13.6	9	40.9	7	31.8	2.0
4	I use language exchange platforms to practice speaking French with native speaker	1	4.5	0	0	4	18.2	17	77.3	1.3
5	I use online learning application (Duolingo, babble) to practice and improve my French	4	18.2	5	22.7	6	27.3	7	31.8	2.2

1.   Never 2. Rarely 3. Sometimes 4. Always

Table 7: Descriptive statistics for four sections

Four sections	N	Range statistic	Mean	Standard Error	Standard dev
Oral proficiency	22	2.60	2.57	.154	.723
Self-assessment	22	2.60	2.49	.153	.716
Strategies	22	2.60	2.40	.152	.714
Online resources	22	2.60	2.20	.147	.690

Interpretation:

Section 1: Oral Proficiency

The mean score of 2.57 for oral proficiency indicates that learners perceive their spoken French abilities to be slightly above average. This suggests that while they have some confidence in their oral skills, there is still significant room for improvement. The score reflects a moderate level of proficiency, highlighting the need for additional practice and

support to help students reach higher levels of fluency and accuracy in their oral expression.

Section 2: Self-Assessment

With a mean score of 2.49, learners' self-assessment of their French language skills is just below the mid-point, suggesting a slightly lower level of confidence in their overall abilities. This score implies that students are aware of their limitations and areas that require further development. Enhancing self-assessment practices could involve more reflective exercises and feedback mechanisms to help learners accurately gauge and improve their skills.

Section 3: Strategies

The mean score of 2.40 for strategies indicates that learners employ language learning strategies at a moderate level. This score reflects a need for increased awareness and use of effective language learning strategies. Introducing students to a broader range of strategies, including metacognitive, cognitive, and social strategies, could improve their ability to learn and use French more effectively

Section 4: Use of Online Applications and Resources

A mean score of 2.20 for the use of online applications and resources suggests that learners are not fully utilizing digital tools and online resources to enhance their French language skills. This score, the lowest among the four sections, indicates a potential area for significant improvement. Encouraging the use of online platforms, apps, and other digital resources can provide additional opportunities for practice and exposure to authentic language use, thereby enhancing oral proficiency.

Summary

The descriptive statistics from the questionnaire reveal that learners of French at ABU Zaria have a moderate level of oral proficiency and employ learning strategies to some extent but lack confidence in their abilities and underutilize online resources. The mean scores for each section are as follows: Oral Proficiency: 2.57,Self-Assessment: 2.49,Strategies: 2.40 and

the Use of Online Applications and Resources: 2.20.

These findings indicate that there is a considerable need for targeted interventions to boost learners' confidence, expand their strategic approach to language learning, and encourage greater use of digital tools. By addressing these areas, educators can help students achieve higher levels of oral proficiency and overall language competence.

Results (Direct observation)

The results from the direct observation and speaking exercise of 22 learners were systematically analyzed across four key criteria: Expression/Accuracy (Fluency), Confidence, Vocabulary, and Pronunciation.

Table 8: Rating Scale

Expression/fluency(EX)	4	3.5	3	2.5	2	1.5	1	0.5	0
Confidence(C)	3	2.5	2	1.5	1	0			
Vocabulary(LX)	3	2.5	2	1.5	1	0			
Pronunciation(P)	3	2.5	2	1.5	1	0			

Table 9 :Learners' scores in each of the criteria

Learner	EX	C	LX	P	Learner	EX	C	LX	P
1	1.5	2	1.5	1.5	**14**	1.5	1	1	1
2	2.5	2	2	2	**15**	2	1.5	1	1.5
3	3	2.5	2.5	2.5	**16**	2	2.5	1.5	2
4	1.5	2	1	1	**17**	2	1	1.5	1.5
5	2	1.5	1.5	1.5	**18**	2	1.5	1	1.5
6	1	1.5	1	1	**19**	3	2	2.5	2
7	1.5	1.5	2	1.5	**20**	2	1.5	1.5	1.5
8	1.5	2	2	1.5	**21**	2	1.5	2	1.5
9	3	2	2.5	2.5	**22**	2	1.5	1.5	1.5

10	2.5	2	1.5	1.5	
11	2	2	1	1.5	

Each criterion was evaluated based on specific point systems, and the performance of the learners was categorized as above average, average, or below average.

1. **Expression/Accuracy: (Fluency)** Out of 4 points, we observed the following:Above Average: 5, Average: 10, Below Average: 7. Analysis: The distribution indicates that a majority of the learners (15 out of 22) fall within the average to above-average range for fluency, suggesting that while most students can express themselves reasonably well, a significant number (7 learners) struggle with maintaining fluency and accuracy. This highlights a need for focused practice on speaking fluidly and accurately without hesitation.

2. **Confidence Scale:** Out of 3 points, we observe the following: Above Average: 10, Average: 10, Below Average: 2 . Analysis: Confidence levels are relatively high among the learners, with 20 out of 22 learners rated as average or above average. This suggests that most students are reasonably confident in their speaking abilities. The low number of students in the below-average category indicates that confidence, while generally good, can be further reinforced to ensure all students feel secure in their speaking abilities.

3. **Vocabulary Scale**: Out of 3 points we observe the following:Above Average: 7, Average: 9, Below Average: 6. Analysis: Vocabulary usage among the learners is moderately balanced, with 16 out of 22 learners falling within the average to above-average range. However, a notable portion of the students (6 learners) were rated below average, indicating gaps in vocabulary knowledge. This suggests that there is room for improvement in expanding the learners' lexical repertoire to enhance their overall communicative competence.

4. **Pronunciation Scale:** Out of 3 points we observe the following :Above Average: 6 ,Average: 13, Below Average: 3. Analysis: Pronunciation skills are predominantly average among the learners, with 19 out of 22 learners rated as average or above average. Only a small number of learners (3) struggle significantly with pronunciation. This indicates that while the general pronunciation skills are acceptable, there is still a need for targeted practice

to achieve clearer and more accurate pronunciation for all students.

Discussion

The results indicate several key areas for targeted improvement in the oral proficiency of 400 level learners of French at ABU Zaria. There is a need for more activities that promote spontaneous speaking and practice under real-time conditions to help students develop greater fluency and accuracy. While confidence levels are generally good, continued encouragement and opportunities for public speaking and presentations can further bolster students' confidence. Efforts should be made to expand learners' vocabulary through diverse reading materials, thematic vocabulary exercises, and practical usage scenarios. Pronunciation practice should be integrated into the curriculum, with specific exercises focusing on phonetic accuracy, stress patterns, and intonation.

Overall, the findings from this study not only highlight the specific strengths and weaknesses of the learners at ABU Zaria but also provide a framework for addressing similar challenges faced by French language learners across Nigerian universities. By implementing the recommended strategies, educators can enhance the oral proficiency of their students, ensuring they are better equipped for academic and real-world communication.

Conclusion and recommendations

The evaluation of oral proficiency among 400-level French learners at Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) Zaria reveals critical insights into the challenges and opportunities for enhancing spoken French skills. Through a combination of survey data, classroom observations, and literature review, it is evident that while students exhibit a foundational understanding of French, significant barriers to fluency remain. These barriers include limited exposure to authentic spoken French, insufficient practice opportunities, reliance on traditional teaching methods, lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes, pronunciation difficulties, and limited vocabulary.

The use of online resources and innovative learning strategies emerges as a promising avenue for improvement. Students who actively engaged with digital tools and interactive platforms demonstrated notable progress in their oral skills, underscoring the potential of

technology-enhanced learning environments. Additionally, language immersion programs, active participation in French language clubs, and seeking opportunities to converse in French with peers and native speakers outside the classroom are vital methods for further improving oral proficiency. These strategies provide practical, real-world contexts for language use, which are crucial for developing fluency and confidence.

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed to enhance oral proficiency in French at ABU Zaria. First, incorporating more interactive and communicative activities within the curriculum can provide students with practical speaking experience. Second, leveraging online resources and multimedia tools can offer additional practice outside the classroom. Third, continuous professional development for instructors on the latest language teaching methodologies can ensure that pedagogical approaches remain dynamic and effective. Fourth, encouraging students to engage in language immersion programs, join French language clubs, and seek opportunities for conversation with peers and native speakers can significantly bolster their speaking abilities.

Ultimately, this study highlights the importance of a multifaceted approach to language instruction, integrating both traditional and modern techniques to foster a more robust learning experience. By addressing the identified challenges and implementing the recommended strategies, ABU Zaria can significantly enhance the oral proficiency of its French learners. Moreover, the insights gained from this study are applicable not only to learners at ABU but also to French language students across Nigerian universities, providing a valuable framework for improving oral proficiency nationwide.

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