The Role of Language in Sustainable Library Services in Nigerian Academic Libraries: French Language in Perspective

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Abstract
Language remains an integral part of man's co-existence, particularly the natural language. This is because it is the most effective medium of communication among humans. Hence, no sphere of human endeavour can be sustained without language as it is the medium through which information, ideas and opinions are expressed. Moreover, in order to access and document information either in print or through electronic media, one must be able to decipher the language code of the information concerned. Hence, the need for language in effective library services cannot be overemphasized particularly in the academic libraries. This paper therefore examined the role of Language in Sustainable Library Services in the Nigerian Academic Libraries with focus on French language. With the rising number of students studying French Language in the Nigerian tertiary institutions, there tends to be a language barrier between the library staff and the French Language learners seeking for information items. It is therefore needful for the library personnel to be sent for French language training courses which will afford them opportunity to acquire French language skills that could facilitate sustainable library and information service delivery in the Nigerian Academic Libraries.

Key Terms: Academic Libraries; Communication; Language; French Language; Sustainable Library Services.

Introduction
The academic library is a type of library that is attached to a tertiary institution or a research centre. It is often referred to as the nerve centre of such institutions as it facilitates learning and research. Apart from playing very critical roles in the students' educational pursuit, the academic library resources, personnel and services also assist academic staff in ensuring that the educational goals of the institution are achieved. However, certain factors have hindered the effective services delivery of academic libraries particularly in Nigeria. One of the factors that hinder such services is the lack of language proficiency particularly as regards foreign languages. This paper therefore, looks into the role of language in sustainable library services in Nigeria academic libraries with French language in perspective.

Language is the chief means of communication among humans despite man’s great technological advancements. In fact, in our today's globalised world, the need for one to be bilingual or multilingual cannot be overemphasized particularly if one is to excel career wise.
There is need therefore for academic library staff to be trained on the acquisition of foreign language skills so as to facilitate library services (Ward, 2009). This aforementioned language skill will help the library staff to properly exploit information and adequately communicate with clients (Reser and Schunem, 1992). In other words, such a staff will facilitate a better realisation of the curricula goals of the institution in which he/she serves. As such, the staffs in Nigeria Academic libraries need to be proficient in foreign languages particularly in French language so as to be able to offer effective and sustainable library services to their users without any language barrier.

In fact, the need for French language proficiency by the library staff has become imperative as the number of higher institutions in the country that offer French language as a course of study keeps spiralling. In fact, it has led to a handful of inter-university exchange programmes between the Nigeria government and some francophone speaking countries. Considering the fore stated and the strategic position of Nigeria not only in the West African sub-region but at the global sphere, it is the position of this paper that French language proficiency by the Nigeria Academic librarians will go a long way in facilitating an effective information service provision to the French speaking Academic library patrons.

To properly explore the subject of discussion, this paper is basically divided into five sections. First, concepts of language and academic library are explained. Second, the theoretical frame work of the study is stated. Third, the role of foreign language proficiency in the sustainability of effective library services is reviewed. Fourth, the importance of French language proficiency in the sustainability of effective library services in the Nigerian Academic Libraries is pointed. Finally, ways of developing the library personnel’s foreign language competencies are suggested.

The Concept of Language
Language could be said to be a vague concept if it is not clearly classified or explained by its user but for the purpose of this work, the paper is less concerned with other artificial and highly restricted forms of the term. This paper is basically concerned with human or natural language. The concept of language is as old as man’s existence. A number of definitions on the term ‘language’ have been proposed by a variety of scholars from varied perspectives. According to Sapir (1921), “Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols.” Further, he argued that language as a conscious act in which an individual is in control and choses what he/she wishes to communicate and how to go about it. On the other hand, Chomsky (1969) views language as an instinctive phenomenon guided by rules of which in most cases the speaker is ignorant of. He argued that every human has an inborn faculty known as language of which the expressed output is shaped by lots of factors such as the social environment and mood. Sharing the same view with Chomsky, Pinker (1994) in Poole (1999) maintains that language is “instinctive”. Elaborating on this point of view, Poole avers that “language is instinctive in so as far as we are all born with the predisposition to speak” (p.5). Further, he argued that language is acquired without tuition and that our thoughts are unconsciously converted to speech when we speak. Poole (1999) therefore defines language as “a medium of communication specific to a society” (p.6).

For Robins (1990), “Language is a form of human communication by means of a system of symbols principally transmitted by vocal sounds” (p. 12). Prasad (2012), views language as
“a device of expression of thoughts or ideas in written or graphic forms” of which its purpose is communication (p.2). Crystal (1989) refers to language “as human vocal noise (or the graphic representation of this noise in writing) used systematically and conventionally by a community for the purposes of communication.” (p.251).

From all the definitions of language advanced above, it is obvious that the main purpose of language is communication. If a language does that meet this criterion, its existence becomes irrelevant to its users. Language is therefore an indispensable aspect of human existence and co-existence. It is a divine ability given to man through which his thoughts, ideas, beliefs, and emotions are expressed. It is an innate human ability. It is incontrovertibly central to the entirety of human activities whose functions are of crucial relevance not only to our collective existence but to the overall achievement of whatever aspirations we envisage in the society. Being a sphere in the academic enclave where information is documented and also accessed however, the academic library cannot be sustained without its staff being proficient in languages particularly foreign languages. This is because the library users irrespective of their nationality will have to communicate with library staff in the course of accessing information. Proficiency is also needed for effective ordering and acquisitions. This takes us to the concept of academic libraries.

Concept of Academic Library
Academic libraries are basically the pride of their parent institutions. They are libraries that are attached to institutions of higher learning for the purpose of serving the teaching and research needs of students, staff and researchers. Their Philosophy is usually to advance learning and knowledge acquisition. John (2013) in Khanna (1987) defined academic libraries “as those special libraries found in educational institutions and whose main purpose is to the special purpose of serving the special needs of the specialized or homogenous clientele”. Being the basic unit of the information infrastructure of all academic entities, they are potential learning environments that actively contribute in the learning process of the study programmes of their parent bodies. In other words, they strategically support and promote cutting edge research by way of working collectively with other faculty units in the struggle for the attainment of quality study aims.

According to Edoka (2000), the general functions of academic libraries are:

i. To provide information materials required for the academic programmes of the parent institution.

ii. To provide research information resources in consonance with the needs of faculty and research students.

iii. To provide information resources for recreation and for personal self-development of users.

iv. To provide study accommodation in a useful variety of locations.

v. To provide protection and security for these materials.

vi. To co-operate with other libraries at appropriate levels for improved information services.

vii. To provide specialized information service to appropriate segments of the wider community.

Although, Rothstein (1955) is of the opinion that academic libraries have enjoyed an emotional “heart of the campus” status in the past, many academic libraries however have not realized their full potential in support of institutional missions (Stoffle, Guskin and Boisse,
1984). Since the mission of these libraries is fundamentally tied with the communication of knowledge via the provision of repackaged information through user friendly devices and services, there is absolute need to look at what and how well such libraries can contribute to achieving the overall goals of faculty. However, institutional missions vary (Fraser, McClure and Leahy, 2002) and the methods by which academic libraries contribute value certainly have to vary. Therefore, each academic library must determine the unique ways in which they contribute to the mission of their institution and use that information to guide planning and decision making (Hernon and Altman, 1998). It is based on the fore stated premise that this paper argues that French language utilization has a strong role to play in sustainable academic library services in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework
This paper is anchored on the theory of linguistic communication. However, before we launch onto discussions on the relevancy of this theory to this work, we shall briefly explain the key concepts in this theory: Linguistics and Communication.

- **Linguistics**
  Linguistics is the scientific study of human language. According to Akmajian, Demers, Farmer and Harnish (2012), linguistics is a field of study that is fundamentally “concerned with the nature of language and (linguistics) communication. Having examined the concept of language above; we shall concentrate more on communication in this section.

- **Communication**
  Communication is as old as man. It is an act in which man engages in from conception to death. Communication is a process that involves the sending and receiving of message(s). According to Bernstein and Teigerman (1982), communication is an active process requiring a sender who encodes or formulates a message and transmits it to a receiver. The receiver decodes or comprehends the message” (7). For Croft (2004), “Communication encompasses a great deal of human (and animal) activity. Reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing images, and creating images are all acts of communication”. Akmajian et al. (2012) assert that “communication is a social affair, usually taking place within the context of a fairly well defined social situation” (p.365). Communication could be done in verbal or written form. Other forms of communication include gesture, sign and body language. Linguistic Communication is the ability to express one’s self in a linguistic code that is understood by an intended hearer, bearing also the intended message of the sender.

Theory of Linguistic Communication: The Message Model
Often times, linguists are concerned with the description of language structure without also considering its communicative function. The theory of linguistics communication is therefore a theoretical approach that considers language from the point of view of its communicative function. In this work, the message model of this theory is specifically used. Though, for some theorists particularly the pragmatists, the message model is an idealistic proposition which is hardly obtainable in the real world’s communication process. However, we still find it very relevant in this work as it provides us with tools for explaining the need for the Nigerian Academic library staff to acquire foreign language skills, particularly in French, in order to facilitate effective communication between the library personnel and library users who happens to be from the francophone world.

The message model is a linguistics model of communication in which the speaker has a message in mind; he encodes this message in a manner that will be meaningful in a language,
then sends out this message via a code that is peculiar to the concerned language to the hearer who decodes the message.

![Diagram](encoded_message_to_decoded_message.png)

**Fig 1:** Schema of the Message Model of Linguistic Communication Theory

However, where the hearer has not acquired the skills of the code of the concerned language, it becomes difficult for such hearer to decode the message. Thus, communication is hampered. This can be said to be the description of the situation of an academic library staff who has not acquired foreign language skills that will enable such a staff communicate with users and as well decode foreign titles.

It is therefore very needful that the academic library staffs acquire language skills particularly foreign language skills. Acquiring the skills for a particular linguistic code (language) includes learning the rules that guides its proper usage without which such a code could be wrongly used. This could bring about wrong expressions that could also be wrongly interpreted. This can be very frustrating for the communicators. Communication is therefore effective when a linguistic code is encoded and decoded according to the rule of the concerned language. Having established the fact that effective communication is very needful for effective library services, the importance of language proficiency particularly in foreign languages cannot be undermined; hence, the need to review the role of foreign language proficiency in the sustainability of effective library services.

**Role of Foreign Language Proficiency in the Sustainability of Effective Library Services**

In today’s world that has become a global village, the need for foreign language proficiency cannot be undermined if one must excel career wise. Language proficiency also keeps one abreast with the global trends in his or her career. Hence, for one to excel in librarianship, the need for foreign language proficiency cannot be downplayed. Pointing out the importance of acquiring foreign language skills for effective carrier practice, Offor (2014) opined that language acquisition “is imperative as it enables one to access information, benefit from people’s ideas and also negotiate” (p.172). Hence the concepts of bilingual and multilingualism become inevitable. Therefore, for effective services to be sustained in an academic library, the library personnel need to be proficient in foreign languages.

Proficiency in foreign language facilitates academic library services such as information accessing and dissemination, ordering of books with foreign titles and cataloguing as these services are offered without language hitches. Affirming this fact, Ward (2009) states that “In an academic and research setting, the dissemination and enhanced access to scholarly information in foreign languages have never been more important than in the current, increasingly globalized information market and in ubiquitous international research cooperation”. Pointing out the need for foreign language proficiency in effective library
career practice in the academic library, Reser and Schunem (1992) observed from their research that: “in technical services, working knowledge of a language may be adequate to provide access to the material, while in public services, any direct contact with speakers of other languages demands a higher skill level” (p.53).

Outlining further service areas where the need for foreign language proficiency is inevitable, Ward (2009) remarks that the tasks of selecting, ordering, cataloguing and provision of access to foreign language titled materials requires language proficiency on the part of the library staff. She further stressed that the aforementioned tasks “require different levels of language proficiency ranging from bibliographic proficiency to the near-native proficiency of the educated speaker”.

From the above mentioned points, it is obvious that foreign language proficiency plays a very vital role in the sustainability of effective library services. Yet, most if not all academic libraries in Nigeria lack staffs that are proficient in foreign languages. This has greatly hampered effective library services both at the technical services section and the public services section. There is therefore need for our academic librarians to rise up and fill this vacuum that has hindered effective career practice and sustainable services through acquisition of foreign languages skills particularly in French language.

**Importance of French Language Proficiency in the Sustainability of Effective Library Services in the Nigerian Academic Libraries**

The importance of French language proficiency among the Library staff cannot be overemphasized. In fact, it is a necessary tool to be acquired by library personnel practising within the enclaves of the Nigerian tertiary institution. This is because proficiency in French is one of the educational goals stated in the National Policy on Education (NPE 2004:10). Furthermore as pointed out by Khan (2006), for the librarian to be able to offer effective services to its users, such a library personnel “must be well-read and well acquainted with the tools of his trade. He must have a full knowledge of the materials with which he has to deal with.” (p.89). One then wonder how the librarian can meet up with the aforementioned qualities if such a person is not proficient in the working language of the said materials or cannot communicate with its users. French language proficiency is therefore an imperative tool which library personnel in Nigeria tertiary institutions must acquire based on following importance:

- Proficiency in French language facilitates information accessing. It will also promote information and idea sharing with the francophone world; which will be of immense benefits to the academic institution in which the academic library is situated. Moreover, such benefits provide students and faculty staff with more resource materials that facilitates learning and research which has a great impact on the growth and development of the country.
- French language Proficiency will enable the library staff to carry out tasks of disseminating information in French, selection and ordering of books with French language titles as well cataloguing these books without language hitches.
- French language proficiency enhances communication between the public service personnel and students as well as staff of French departments. This hitch free communication will facilitate effective and user-friendly library services as the need of these users are met or attended to.
- Also, francophone students who are studying in Nigeria tertiary institutions could also use the academic libraries without any language barrier. This will go a long way in
facilitating their studies and also encourage other francophone citizens to patronize our tertiary institutions; thereby accruing economic benefits to the country.

- Since one of the criterion for measuring the success of an academic library is its ability to assist its host institution in the achievement of its educational goals, French language proficiency of library personnel will better assist in the realisation of such goals particularly as regards the French course.

Ways of Developing the Library Personnel’s French Language Competencies.

Having established the fact that French language proficiency is very much needful for sustainable library services in the academic library, what then is the way forward? Below are some recommendations that could help in tackling the problem of the lack of proficiency in French by academic library personnel in Nigeria.

- A popular saying goes thus “it is good to catch them young”. While taking into consideration the wisdom in this adage, the Nigeria educational planner enshrined French language as a compulsory subject at the primary and secondary school levels (NPE 2004:10). Parents should therefore encourage their wards to take the study of French language more seriously in their schools as this could assist them in their life careers such as in librarianship.

- Government and the various stakeholders should ensure that French is offered in our primary and secondary schools by providing French teachers and teaching facilities that will facilitate the study of this language at an early stage.

- At the university level, students of library and Information science should be made to take courses in foreign language, particularly French. French for specific objective should be inculcated in their courses of study so as to equip them with the technical skills needed for effective career practice. This will bring about sustainable and effective library services.

- For in-service library staffs that do not have any knowledge of French, their institution should liaise with the Nigerian French language village or French culture centres for trainings in French that will enable them acquire skills that will make them communicate or work on documents or information in French.

- Exchange programmes should not just be limited to bureaucrats. Academic institutions should also be involved, particularly the library staff. Exchange programmes between the Nigerian Academic Librarians and her francophone counterparts should be encouraged.

- The government and concerned stakeholders should make French language proficiency one of the criteria for recruitment particularly in academic libraries. This will make job seekers to seek for means of improving or acquiring skills in French language.

- Academic library personnel should be encouraged and sponsored for workshops, conferences and seminars that will enhance their performance in French.

- Staff who have elementary knowledge of French and who wish to further their studies could be encouraged to do so in French speaking countries. By so doing, they could acquire both professional skills and language skills that could aid improve effective library services.
Conclusion
One of the factors that have hampered effective and sustainable library services in the Nigeria academic library is the lack of foreign language proficiency among its personnel. This calls for concern as language proficiency is a necessary tool not an optional tool in the practice of effective librarianship. Sadly, Students and staff of the French department as well as francophone students are the worst victims of this deficiency. This is because the aforementioned library user cannot be offered an effective library services as the library personnel in most Nigeria academic library lack the language skills to do so. Due to lack of French language proficiency, library services such as information accessing and dissemination in French, selection and ordering of books with French language titles as well cataloging of these books are hampered. This paper therefore calls on the government and the various stakeholders to take foreign language proficiency more seriously particularly in French language. The paper further suggests among others that in-service library personnel be trained on foreign language proficiency particularly French. This will enable the Nigerian academic library personnel keep abreast with her counterparts in the globe as well enhance sustainable library services in the Nigeria academic libraries.

References


