

## FRENCH LANGUAGE, CULTURE AND CREATIVITY

*Harrison G. Ugbijeh*  
*French Department,*  
*Federal College of Education,*  
*Kontagora,*  
*Niger State.*

### **Abstract**

Creativity is an essential concept in all educational sectors of the twenty-first century. It is central to all the preparations for learning and vital for the total educative process. However, it is difficult to define and complicated to measure. As a result, there are quite diverse definitions and testing approaches for the construct of creativity. This paper has therefore examined the concept of creativity, French language and culture. The paper also discussed the impact of creativity on French language and ways of enhancing creativity in foreign language

French language has sojourned in Africa for more than four centuries. Ajiboye (2002) cited in Salam and Ashipal (2010) remarked that French language had been introduced in Africa as early as 1624 via the combination of colonial and cultural circumstances. Apart from the home continent of the language, Europe, it is in the continent of Africa that French enjoys the largest potential francophone concentration in terms of population of its speakers. In West Africa alone, comprising not less than 16 nations having three different European languages playing the

statutory role of official languages, French remains the official medium of eight countries, while the remaining eight nations have English and Portuguese as their official media of expression. According to Ajiboye (2002) Africa alone accounts for 33% of the world's French. In fact, out of not less than fifty three countries in Africa. There are twenty four of them whose official language is French. Even in the three Maghrebian countries of North Africa, its importance is not despised. In spite of the seemingly domineering role of Arabic language in Morocco, Tunisia

and Algeria, French is equally almost as important as Arabic in all sphere of life of the citizenry of these three countries. More importantly, French, language has today become a world language of undebatable international recognition and acceptability. Meanwhile, let writer briefly take a glance at the world view of the French language.

### **French Language**

French is a Romance language, belonging to the indo-European family. It descended from the spoken Latin language of the Roman Empire, as did Languages such as Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Romania, Catalan and others. French has evolved from Gallo-Romance, they spoke Latin in Gaul, and more specifically in Northern Gaul. French was also influenced by native Celtic languages of Northern Roman Gaul like Gallia Belgica and by the (Germanic) Frankish language of the post-Roman Frankish invaders. Today owing to France's past overseas expansion, there are numerous French-based Creole languages, most notably Haitian Creole.

French is the second most widespread language worldwide after English, being an official language in 29 countries, most of which are French-speaking countries. It is spoken as a first language in France, southern Belgium western Switzerland, Monaco, the Canadian province of Quebec and by various communities elsewhere.

According to a survey of the European commission, French is the

fourth-most widely spoken mother tongue in the European Union. It is also the third-most widely understood language in the EU. As a result of French and Belgian colonialism from 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century onward, French was introduced to new territories in the Americas, Africa and Asia. Most second language speakers reside in francophone Africa, in particular Gabon, Algeria, Mauritius, Senegal and Cote d'Ivoire. In 2007, French was estimated to have around 75 million native speakers.

French has a long history as an international language of commerce, diplomacy, literature and scientific standard and is an official language of many international organizations including the United Nations, the European Union, NATO, the WTO and the ICRC. In 2011, French was deemed by Bloomberg Business week to be one of the top three most useful languages for business, after English and Chinese.

Under the constitution of France, French has been the official language of the Republic since 1992. France mandates the use of French in official government publications, public education except in specific cases and legal contract.

In Belgium, French is the official language of Wallonia and one of the two official languages (along with Dutch) of the Brussels capital region, where it is spoken by the majority of the population often as their primary language.

French is one of the four official languages of Switzerland (along with

German, Italian and Romansh) and is spoken in the western part of Switzerland called Romandie, of which Geneva is the largest city. French is the native language of about 20% of the Swiss population.

A majority of the world's French speaking population lives in Africa. According to the 2007 report by the Organization internationale de la Francophonie, an estimated 115 million African people spread across 31 francophone countries can speak French as either a first or a second language. This number does not include the people living in non-francophone African countries who have learned French as a foreign language. Due to the rise of French in Africa, the total French-speaking population worldwide is expected to reach 700 million people in 2050. French is the fastest growing language on the continent (in terms of either official or foreign language).

French is mostly second language in Africa but it has become first language in some urban areas, such as the region of Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire and in Libreville, Gabon. There is not a single African French, but multiple forms that diverged through contact with various indigenous African languages.

Sub-sahara Africa is the region where the French language is most likely to expand because of the expansion of education and rapid population growth. It is also where the language has evolved the most in recent years. Some vernacular forms of French in Africa can be difficult to understand

for French speakers from other countries but written forms of the language are very closely related to those of the rest of the French-speaking world.

### **French Culture: Customs and Tradition**

Most people associate French culture with Paris, which is a center of fashion, cuisine, art and architecture, but life outside of the city of lights is very different and varies by region. France doesn't just have different culture; the word "culture actually comes from France. According to Cristina De Rossi, "culture derives from the same French term, which in turn derives from the Latin *colere*, meaning to tend to the earth and grow, cultivation and nurture".

Historically, French culture was influenced by Celtic and Gallo-Roman cultures as well as the Franks, a Germanic tribe. France was initially defined as the western area of Germany known as Rhineland but it later came to refer to a territory that was known as Gaul during the Iron Age and Roman era.

### **Languages**

French is the dominant language of the country's 66 million residents, but there are a number of variants based on region. French the official language, is the first language of 88 percent of the population. According to the French ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development, French is the second most widely learned foreign

language in the world, with almost 120 million students.

About 3 percent of the population speaks German dialect and there is a small group of Flemish speakers in the northeast. Arabic is the third minority language. Those living near the border of Italy speak Italian as a second language, and Basque is spoken by people living along the French-Spanish border. Other dialects and languages include Catalan, Breton (the Celtic language), Occitan dialects and languages from the former French colonies include Kabyle and Antillean Creole.

### **Religion**

Catholicism is the predominant religion of France. In a survey by the French Institute of Public Opinion (IFOP), 64 percent of the population (about 41.6 million people) identified themselves as Roman Catholic. According to a 2010 survey by the Pew Research Center, 7.5 percent (4.7 million people) are Muslim. Pew estimated that the Jewish population was 310,000; there were 280,000 Buddhists and 3,000 Hindus. Nearly 18 million people practiced folk religion.

### **Values**

The French take immense pride in their nation and government and are typically offended by any negative comments about their country. Visitors, particularly Americans often interpret their attitude towards foreigners as rude. The expression “chauvinism, meaning

an attitude that members of your gender are always better than those of the opposite sex, or a belief that your country, race, etc, is better than any others, originated from France around 1851 according to the Merriam Webster Dictionary. While women are playing a greater role in family life and business, many still see it as a male dominated culture.

The French embody romance and passion and there is an open attitude toward sex outside of marriage, according to a study by France’s National Research Agency on Aids. Even the country’s top politicians have been known to carry out extramarital affairs without making effort to conceal them.

Cristina De Rossi posited that “from around the 16th century, in Europe, culture became a term for the cultivation of the mind, the intellect, knowledge, learning, creative faculties and acceptable ways of behaving”. The French embrace style and sophistication and take pride in the fact that even their public spaces strike a regal tone. They believe in egalite, which means equality, and is part of the country’s motto: “Liberte, Egalite, fraternite”. Many say they place a higher importance on equality than liberty and fraternity.

### **French Cuisine**

Food and wine are central to life at all socioeconomic levels and much socializing is done around lengthy dinners. While cooking styles have

changed to emphasize lighter fare, many still associate French cooking with heavy sauces and complicated preparation. Some classic French dishes include boeuf bourguignon, a stew made of beef braised in red wine, beef broth and seasoned with garlic, onions and mushrooms, and coq au vin, a dish made with chicken, Burgundy wine, lardons (small strips or cubes of pork fat), button mushroom, onions and optional garlic. Currently, traditional French cooking is on the decline. Seventy percent of the restaurants are using prepared meals instead of fresh cuisine that is a cornerstone of the culture.

### **Clothing**

Paris is known as the home of many high end fashion houses, such as Dior, Hermes, Louis vuitton and channel. Many French people dress in a sophisticated, professional and fashionable style, but it is not overly fussy. Typical outfits include dresses, suits, long coats, scarves and berets. The term haute couture is associated with French fashion and loosely means fancier garments that are handmade or made to order. In France, the term is protected by law and is defined by the Paris chamber of commerce.

### **French Art**

Art is everywhere in France, particularly in Paris and other major cities, and Gothic, Romanesque Rococo and Neoclassic influences can be seen in many churches and other public buildings. Many of history's most

renowned artists, including Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, and Camille Pissarro, sought inspiration in Paris and they gave rise to the impressionism movement. The Louvre Museum in Paris is among the world's largest museums and is home to many famous works of art, including the Mona Lisa and Venus de Milo.

### **Holidays and Celebration**

The French celebrate the traditional Christian holidays of Christmas and Easter. They mark May Day, also known as Labour Day, on May 1<sup>st</sup>. Victory in Europe Day on May 8<sup>th</sup> commemorates the end of hostilities in Europe in World War II. Bastille day is celebrated on July 14<sup>th</sup>. This is the day the Bastille fortress in Paris was stormed by revolutionaries to start the French Revolution.

### **The Concept of Creativity**

Given that the term "creativity" is multifaceted and complex, it is important to consider creativity from different perspectives. Of course, no individual possesses all the characteristics or traits of creativity, nor can anyone display them all the time.

Young (1985, 85) defines creativity as "the skill of bringing about something new and valuable" into existence. He argues that when creative people innovate toward newness, they often find a series of alternative solutions and can quickly make decision about what to include and what to eliminate.

Ogbe (2012) asserts that creativity is imagination, originality, inventiveness and giftedness. He argues that creativity is the result of expressions, which are novel, useful and relevant to the solution of the problem being examined. Ogunshina (2010) sees creativity as the ability to create, which is usually thought to be an attribute of only a gifted few, primarily those having artistic talent. Today, creativity is no more considered a special ability reserved for the gifted nor is it assigned to a limited member of human activities. Creative potentials exist in every individual and await proper condition to be expressed. Robinson (2011) also believes that it is a common myth that only special people are creative. He says that everyone has the capacities for creativity, but such capacities should be learned and developed. In other words creativity is not static personal trait, but rather a fundamental feature of every human being. He also notes that people can be more creative in some areas and less creative in others. When someone is not creative in something, for example in language learning, it means that he or she does not know how creativity works in practice in that specific context. Mukherjee (2002) cited in Ogunshina (2014) asserts that creativity is the capacity of all individuals to compose or to produce. What he produces can be composition, product or ideas of any kind which are essentially new which was previously unknown to the producer. According to Oloruko-Oba (2006) cited in(Ogunstina, 2014),

creativity is thought of as being constructive productive behavior that can be seen in action or accomplishment.

Creativity is thus the ability to re-define, recreate and/or re-produce things by firstly questioning them, then by looking at them from a fresher, different angle or perspective, and finally by formulating and or producing a renewed, different alternative of the very thing that is being looked at.

### **Foreign Language and Creativity**

Language has the enormous potential to be creative. It is used deliberately to create works of art, and for spontaneous communication. Learning a language may be a creative exercise because language is vast and complex, and each user needs to use and combine elements of knowledge in new ways.

Language teaching is one of those very open and flexible areas where creative activities can be easily embedded in both the teaching activities as well as in the language curriculum. It is like having different ingredients to cook and being able to combine them differently each time in order to realize a delicious dish. Thus creativity lies in the ability to construct meaningful language from the building blocks available to express ideas using the resources available, but recognizing that the resources can be adapted and that the language learner can be in control of resource rather than subject to their limits and restriction.

Foreign language becomes creative when it ceases to be about language learning and becomes interactive. This results in the process of struggling to find a way of articulating the full, embodied and engaged interaction with the world that comes when we put the language we are learning into action. It is what happens when we adapt from pre-existing scripts and begin to play, perform and live in language as part of an expression of a fuller dimension of life. We make a distinction between the effort of using language that one is learning in the classroom contexts and the effort of being a person in that language in the social world of everyday interactions. “language activists” are those who move in the world in a way that allows the risk of stepping out of one’s habitual way of speaking and attempt to develop different more relational ways of interacting with the people and phenomena that one encounters in everyday life.

The use of any language is inherently creative. Thinking, re-enacting the speech, thought and lexis of another foreign culture inspires creativity in itself. Examples would be the need for creativity as part of translation strategies, in oral communication (e.g. to paraphrase when one does not know the exact word), and in written communication. An appreciation of creativity is also fostered through the cultural aspects of foreign language courses, where students are normally exposed to a wide range of

creative forms (literature, art, film, pop, lyrics etc) either because these are used as texts for language study or because they are part of separate courses that help students acquire an understanding of the culture related to the language. The year abroad is a particular space available to linguists in which to exercise creativity.

### **Enhancing Creativity in Foreign Language Classroom**

To ensure creativity, assessment of course work should involve sharing and the active participation of the students. Therefore the parameters for creativity that are to be assessed should be made clear with the students beforehand, to raise awareness and for clarification. If the teacher acting as an example shows to be creative he/she is also stimulating this quality in his/her students, making them active participants while contacting with the chosen materials and tasks, developing a critical approach to the FL linguistic and cultural space. Incremental progression and cyclical revision will facilitate consolidation and further creative development. Regular assessment of learning progress will provide guidance to students and can also provide pedagogical findings which can contribute to the continuous update of FL frameworks.

Classroom practice can capitalize on the creative materials. Through authentic texts students will be experiencing the target language as it occurs naturally as well as the

pragmatics, that is, interpretation of its utterances in context. This can be enhanced by spoken texts with a visual component as found in televisions broadcast and films, where speakers and listeners can be seen in an interpersonal context and non-verbal phenomena can be observed which reinforce the verbal exchanges, such as paralinguistic functions of gesture, facial expression and body language. Students will also receive explicit information for a more conscious learning of the semantics, grammatical and phonological characteristics of the target language.

Experience has shown that students are best encouraged to be creative when they are given independence to choose their own focus for tasks and, indeed to decide what they will study. Students might be encouraged to be creative by involving them in decisions about how and what should be taught in the language classroom.

Foreign language teachers may encourage students to take active participation in the class by promoting a friendly, mutually beneficial atmosphere and emphasizing that individual participation is crucial to collective learning. The teacher should engage in class activities (e.g mimicking, role play, etc) and ask for students feedback on issues related to language. Thereby students begin to perceive the classroom context not as an area where to compete, but as a meeting point where to learn from each other. Once the tension and

fear barrier is broken creativity will express itself more easily.

### **Conclusion**

The theories and ideas related to creativity often focus on the various characteristics of creativity including the creative process, person, and product. An emphasis on one aspect of creativity over another can have a definite impact on the teaching approaches. It is vital to find ways to foster creative passion in language learners. Therefore, instead of creativity being the subject in the classroom, it should be the outcome of a collaborative effort among educational researchers, curriculum developers, teachers, school administrators and other participants of education.

### **Recommendations**

To enhance creativity in the teaching and learning of French language the paper recommends the following measures.

The programme of study should be based on communicative competence rather than being programmed based on observation of rules of grammar.

Foreign language teachers should create friendly atmosphere in the classroom. They should be at alert to encourage and help plan ways of expressing their ideas and feeling in different media.

Teachers should vary their activities and methodologies to avoid monotony and boredom. They should keep abreast with modern technologies that will enhance their teaching abilities.

Scholarship should be awarded to students who perform excellently in French language.

### References

- Ajiboye (2002). Nigeria & French: A Paradox of Closeness & Distance, the 52<sup>nd</sup> Inugural Lecture of the Unilorin, Ilorin, Unilorin Press pp.15-17.
- Ashipa O.A & Salam O. W.(2010). Institutionalization of English and French as Official Languages by African Nations for Speedy Political and Economic Development of the Continent. *In International Journal of Languages and African Development*, Institute de Development Et D. Exchange Endogenes, Quidah, Benin Republique.
- Creativity in Modern Foreign Language <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/.../web0460> creativity in modern foreign. Retrieved 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2015.
- Definition of French language en. Wikipedia.org/wiki/French language. Retrieved 26<sup>th</sup> May, 2015.
- Definition of French Culture [www.live-science.com/39149-French-culture.html](http://www.live-science.com/39149-French-culture.html). Retrieved 26 May, 2015.
- Ogbe M. (2012). *Creativity for Art Education Students*. Samara-Zaria Asekome and Co. Publishers.
- Ogounshina R.A. (2014). Promoting Creativity in Fine Art Education in Nigeria Schools. *In Nigerian Journal of Research in Education*, Federal College of Education, Kontagora, Niger State.
- Robison, K. (2011). *Out of our Minds: Learning to be Creative*. Oxford: Capstone.
- Young J.G. (1985). What is Creativity? *The Journal of Creative Behaviour*, 19 (2), 77-98.