

Russian Language Acquisition Challenge among Learners in Nigeria

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Abstract

Russian Language is one of the widely learnt foreign languages in the Nigerian Universities. Apart from various languages and dialects in Nigeria which made Nigeria a multilingual society, there has been increased urge to bring some other foreign languages such as French, German, Russian, among others for acquisition principally for specific purposes. Since Nigeria's Independence in 1960, indigenous education system in the country has been preoccupied by the use of English as the medium of instruction. In the Nigerian higher institutions where some foreign languages are taught either as courses or as degree awarding programmes, there has been considerable influences that the English language officialisation has on the acquisition of these foreign languages. This paper thus, discusses the acquisition challenges that the learners of Russian language encounter in an English base language of instruction environment. Language Acquisition Theory is used as the theoretical framework of the study. Observational method is used. Related literatures that are directly or indirectly related to the study are reviewed. The study reveals that there are some challenges that learners of Russian language encounter in the course of learning the language. The study also substantiates that the ability of a learner to overcome the challenges makes him to function effectively in the Russian language. Thus, it is therefore recommended

that teachers of Russian should take note of the findings of this paper in the course of teaching their students and familiarize their students with the likely challenges they would encounter during the teaching and learning processes.

Introduction

The 20th century has witnessed upsurge and unprecedented increased efforts at foreign language acquisition in African countries, particularly Nigeria. This is plainly as a result of the contemporary global issues that revolve around international relations, global politics as well as modernization. Globalization, military as well as economic strengths of the world great powers like Russia, France, Germany among others have necessitated that there be cordial and strong ties between them and some developing nations of Africa particularly Nigeria. This has made the languages of these countries to be put into consideration for teaching and learning in the Nigerian universities.

Russian language has thus, become mostly pronounced since the aftermaths of the First World War and the Second World War, which made Russia under the Soviet Union to be on the same pedestal with the United States of America, resulting into a Cold War period with Russia and America placing influences on the Eastern and Western Blocs respectively. Thus, the Soviet periods enticed the Russian language to many countries, particularly Nigeria (Одунуга, 1971). Despite the very many advantages that Nigeria stands to derive from teaching and learning of Russian in Nigeria (Omotade, 2009), students over the years have come to be confronted with some challenges in the course of teaching and learning processes. It is very imperative to discuss this important aspect of Russian language acquisition in Nigeria. Identifying areas of difficulty in learning Russian among students is very necessary as this will go a long way in enhancing proper learning process.

Theoretical Framework

Theories are generally eye-openers into enquiry. Basically, among other relevant functions, theories are used in explaining observed phenomena. For example, researchers are usually propelled into research based on the prevailing happenings. In order to unravel issues in relation to enquires, various hypothesis are formed. Thus, theories are used to account for, and proffer explanation to observed phenomena. Through the aid of theories, researchers can also make prediction in relation to what is obtainable and what is impossible at the end of the research. As a result, good theories, in the course of accounting for a discovery or predicting a possible outcome, also tend to unify a series of generalisations about the world or unify a series of observations about the world (Vanpatten & Williams, 2015).

For this paper, in order to arrive at our targeted aims, that is, to unravel acquisition challenge among Russian language learners in Nigerian universities, Skill Acquisition Theory (SAT) is used. This theory is one of the most widely acclaimed theories in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Many scholars have postulated about SAT (Anderson, 1982; 1993; 2007; Taatgen & Lee, 2003; Kim et al, 2013; Dekeyser, 2015). As espoused by SAT, the way learners of a second language progress in the course of acquiring a divergent of skills, particularly from zero level to proficiency level is substantiated. According to Dekeyser (2015):

skills studied include both cognitive and psychomotor skills, in domains that range from classroom learning to applications in sports and industry. Research in this area ranges from quite theoretical (computational modeling of skill acquisition, the place of skills in an architecture of the mind) to quite applied (how to sequence activities for maximal learning efficiency in areas as diverse as teaching high school algebra, tutoring college physics, coaching professional basketball, or training airplane pilots. P94.

Research Methodology

The study devices observational method to unravel acquisition challenges of Russian learners in Nigeria. In the course of the research, the researcher actively participated in the population sample. The researcher puts Russian learners into close observation. Russian language class-interactions, conversation with Russian learners are used as the source of information for the study. Also, the experiences shared by Russian language lecturer in the course of teaching Russian students contribute to the data source of the study. Secondary sources such as theses, published books and journal articles were used.

Review of Related Literatures

Veritable existing academic debates on Russian language acquisition in Nigeria have largely focused on the socio-political, socio-cultural and socio-economic advantages of the subject matter (Okoadion & Okolie, 2020; Omotade & Oluwafemi, 2018; Nwarukweh, 2021). The historical development of the teaching and learning of Russian language in Nigeria is vividly portrayed by different scholars in the field of Russian studies in Nigeria as well as other related language disciplines (see Omotade, 2004; 2009; 2012; Одунунга, 1971; Мешек & Абыбукр, 2019; Chukwube, 2010). In Nigeria, the study of Russian has been greatly attributed to the unrented efforts of Late

Professor Segun Odunuga (Omotade, 2012; Nwarukweh, 2021). When taken into consideration, the varying academic debates on the teaching and learning of Russian in Nigeria, it becomes overt that Segun Odunuga pioneered Russian Studies in Nigerian universities. This fact has been established by many scholars of Russian Studies in Nigeria. Omotade (2012) in his work entitled: *Russian Studies in Nigerian universities: 1965 to the Present* substantiates thus:

Russian Studies had been introduced into the University of Ibadan Curriculum in 1965, but the full degree programme commenced in 1980. Two teachers started the full degree programme namely, Professor Segun Odunuga and Dr (Mrs) Alla Fawole (a Russian) who retired as a Senior Lecturer, but is currently on a contract appointment with the University. Professor Odunuga also retired in September, 2004 after serving the Department meritoriously for well over forty years. P79.

This captures the emergence of Russian Studies in Nigerian universities. The pioneer of the study of Russian language, Professor Segun Odunuga thus became the first professor of Russian Studies in South Sub-Sahara Africa (Omotade, 2004; 2012; Banjo, 2004; Chukwube, 2010; Мешек & Абубукр, 2019). Having been offered appointment in the then Department of Modern Languages, which is now known as the Department of European Studies, unraveling other spheres of discourse such as European history, European culture and civilization, European politics, with the languages inclusive, Odunuga taught the Russian language and facilitated linkage of the University of Ibadan and the Pushkin Institute, Moscow, for improved language course (Omotade, 2012; Chukwube, 2010). In line with the affirmation made by Omotade, another set of scholars, Мешек & Абубукр (2019) in their work entitled: *'Русский язык в Нигерии'*, portray Odunuga as the progenitor of Russian Studies in Nigeria. These scholars postulate that:

Сегун Одунуга- первый профессор Русского языка на юге Африки (Южнее Сахары), лауреат почётной Пушкинской медали. Считается, что Сегун Одунуга-первый Нигериец, изучивший Русский язык и призывавший Нигерийцев учить Русский язык. Сам он начал учёбу в Пятигорском Государственном Лингвистическом

Университете, затем продолжил в Москве.
P126-127.

Translation:

Segun Odunuga, the first professor of Russian language in South of Africa (South Sahara), laureate of the honourable Pushkin Medal. It is considered that Segun Odunuga is the first Nigerian to have studied Russian language and had urged Nigerians to study Russian. He himself started study at Pyatigorsk State Linguistic University, then, continued in Moscow.

As stated by these scholars, early students of Russian were urged to study the language at the University setting by Professor Segun Odunuga. Little wonder then, that Professor Odunuga, in a personality award programme organized by the (Русский Клуб) Russian Club, University of Ibadan Chapter in 2010/ 2011 academic session in his honour stated that most of his students initially came for different courses entirely during their matriculation but they eventually in one way or the other studied Russian. According to him, some who wanted to read Law such as Bimbo Agboluaje is now having the highest academic certificate, that is, Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) and pulling grounds of great exploit. The same goes for many others, who are currently authorities in their respective chosen careers, academic inclusive.

Одунуга (1971) in a work entitled: '*Обучение Русскому Языку в Нигерии*', made known that in many developing countries of Africa, foreign languages were introduced to the list of compulsory disciplines of higher institutions of learning roughly around the year 1960. Particularly maybe because it was as a result of the attainment of Independence and Nigeria began to Institute her own indigenous education system. This period had the French language paraded in the pre-university education as well as university education. The presence of French of course was not by mistake as most of the neighbouring Franco-phone African countries in one way or the other wanted to have close ties with the new independent Nigeria. But gradually, the Russian language infiltrated into Nigeria. When showcasing the justification for the studying of the Russian language, the main aims of Russian language acquisition are identified by Одунуга (1971) thus:

Цели обучения Русскому Языку
определяются, с одной стороны,
необходимостью привить навыки чтения

специальной литературы студентам технических и сельскохозяйственных высших учебных заведений, с другой-политическим и научным значением Советского Союза, которое является стимулом к всестороннему овладению Русским Языком. Эти стороны взаимосвязаны: знание народа и страны, знакомство с письменно зафиксированным опытом советского народа является основой гуманистического воспитания студентов и наряду с этим повышает их интерес к языку.
P81

Translation:

the aims of Russian language acquisition are shaped on the one hand, to necessarily inculcate reading skills of special literatures in the students of engineering and agriculture of higher educational institutions, on the other hand, towards the political and scientific lexical meaning of the Soviet Union, which presents stimulus towards comprehensive acquirement of Russian language. These angles are interrelated: the importance of people and states, acquaintance with black and white stated experience of Soviet people is of fundamental humanistic training of students and along with this, raises their interest towards language.

As stated by the scholar above, the initial aim of the Russian language acquisition was towards building students in the engineering agriculture faculties towards annexing facts in the Russian technology for domestic development and to become familiarized with a power base in the global politics, the Soviet Union, majorly for inter-cultural communications. But as time went on, it became a fully fledged degree awarding programme.

Chukwube (2010) in a work entitled: '*Four Decades of Teaching Russian Language in Nigeria; Setbacks and Prospects*' substantiates the initial and metamorphological

development of the Russian language in Nigerian universities particularly the University of Nigeria, Nnsuka. According to him:

the study of Russian language in Nigeria is as old as country's Independence, when the University of Nigeria, Nnsuka, was established. Like other newly introduced course, it started as a minor but later became a full degree programme. And as new discipline, it started with only six students who were bold to explore into the seeming strange area of study. This is because, hitherto, only English and French were familiar languages studied in the primary and secondary schools respectively. Even at that, the six students that started with the course registered at subsidiary and were students from various departments. It was much later that the language became a full discipline.

By and large, Russian Studies has come to stay in Nigerian universities, either as taught courses or as fully fledged discipline of degree awarding, especially the University of Ibadan and the University of Lagos (Omotade, 2012; Chukwube, 2010), University of Nigeria Nnsuka (Chukwube, 2010), University of Abuja (Менек & Абыбькп, 2019). As students are yearly admitted to the programme, they have in one way or another encountered some challenges in relation to the acquisition of the Russian language.

The Russian Language; Challenges among Learners in Nigerian Universities.

Foreign language acquisition has never been a hitch-free endeavour in a non-native environment. Abramova, et al (2013) adumbrates the significance of speech (native) community in language acquisition process. Russian language acquisition in Nigeria, a non-native community is not spared in this context. Since 2007/ 2008 academic session that I was matriculated to the University of Ibadan to study Russian, I have personally observed in the Russian language class-rooms, different hurdles that were placed as barriers to me and also very many of my language colleagues. This observation continues as I continued to come in contact with both senior students and junior ones in the years of my study of Russian. Identifiably, these challenges are discussed in two parts namely: (1) Words articulation and (2) Communication, respectively. It is of course worthy to note that Russian alphabets and spelling play significant roles in learning the language. The Russian alphabet consists of 33 Cyrillic

letters; 21 consonants, 10 vowels, and two letters without sound. Generally, Russian uses the following alphabetical order in the language acquisition process.

Аа Бб Вв Гг Дд Ее Ёё Жж Зз Ии Йй Кк Лл
Мм Нн Оо Пп Рр Сс Тт Уу Фф Хх Цц Чч Шш
Щщ Ъъ Ыы Ьь Ээ Юю Яя.

The most interesting thing here is that the problems faced by learners of Russian among Nigerian students begin from the alphabets. Russian and English have some similar letters (A, B, E, K, M, H, O, P, C, T, Y, X). The main problem here thus, lies in differentiating English pronunciation from that of Russian by learners.

(1) Words Articulation: Generally, Russian phonetics deals with production of Russian sounds. In course of acquiring the Russian language, students have over the years come to crossroads dealing with Russian phonetics. Although this paper does not delve into full discourse of Russian phonetics, some Russian vowels are: [o], [a], [e], [и] and [я] are brought into discussion. Here, pronunciation errors among students acquiring the Russian language are identified. Thus, these sounds pose challenge for Russian learners in Nigeria. In order to showcase the traumas associated with these sounds among students this paper treats the sounds independently.

(i) The Russian vowel [o]: This vowel is equivalent to the sound /ɔ/ of English. For example in pot=/pɔt/. In Russian, this sound is found in words such as:

(что́, кто́, он, сто́л, до́м, егó, ко́мната, Анто́н, во́т, заво́д, Ива́нов, уро́к, по́д, шко́ла, то́же,) etc.

In some certain situations, the Russian vowel sound [o] poses challenge for learners as many Russian learners pronounce words with the "o" letter with the sound [o], making the sound obvious all through in the Russian word. Let us consider the following words with letter "o" (Пото́м, это́, мно́го, молодой, молоко́, хоро́шо, пого́да, окно́, доро́га, го́род, зовут, родной, подруга).

In these situations, learners should be made to realize that there exists what is called vowel reduction in Russian. As a result, the sound [o] assumes its rightful articulation only when in the stressed syllables. Thus, when used in the stressed syllables, letter "o" will have the stress mark (') placed on it and will be pronounced as [o]. But if letter "o" is used in either pre-tonic (before stressed syllable) or post-tonic (after stressed syllable) levels, it will be reduced thus [ʌ]. Hence,

До́м [до́м]

Окно́ [ʌкно́]

Хоро́шо [xʌрʌшо́] and not [xóрошо́].

(ii) The Russian vowel sound [a]: This sound poses challenge for students of Russian. It is like the English /æ/ in words like bag=/bæg/. Like the Russian sound [o], the

Russian sound [a] maintains its original articulation when used in a stressed syllable. But it is reduced in an unstressed syllable. Let us consider the following words.

Завтра [зафтра]

Марта [мартА]

Карта [картА]

Парк [парк]

Брат [брат]

Москва [мАсква]

(iii) The Russian vowel sounds [e] and [я]: These two vowel sounds are reduced to [и] sound in pre-tonic and post-tonic syllables. They only maintain their real sounds in the stressed syllables. Let us consider the following instances.

[e]

Сестра[систра]

Мечта [мичта]

Наше [наши]

Инженер [инженер]

Концерт [клнцерт]

Центр [центр]

Аптека [Аптекл]

Отец [Атец]

Тетрадь [титрадь]

Театр [театр]

Нет [нет]

Студент [студент] etc

[Я]

Яйцо [ийцо]

Заяц [заиц]

Понятно [плнятна]

Моя [мля]

Меня [Миня].

(2). Communication: This deals with the combination of lexical items to express one's ideas or opinions, making request, commands, and asking questions. Here, students' vocabulary levels must be high. Because, it is from the available vocabularies that a student has he would communicate. Here, there are salient issues that Russian learners face. For example, the case system of Russian is put into consideration. In Russian, there are six (6) cases in which a Russian noun or pronoun can function. Thus, the Russian case system poses serious threat to Russian language acquisition among learners of Russian in Nigeria. For example, the word "book" is known as "книга" in

Russian. Thus, it means that "book" can be expressed in six different cases and the sense of "book" will still be maintained.

Let us consider that thus:

Книга (book):

1. Это книга. (Nominative case)
This is a book.
2. Нет книги. (Genetive case)
There is no book.
3. Я читаю книгу. (Accusative case)
I am reading a book.
4. Я с книгой. (Instrumental case)
I am with a book.
5. Студент к книге. (Dative case)
The student is moving towards a book.
6. Ручка в книге. (Prepositional case)
The pen is in the book.

It is pertinent to note the various modifications (declensions) that the Russian word "книга" assumes in each of the expressions above. In each of the expressions, the sense of "book" is achieved as evident in the translations provided. Little wonder then that Dr. Akin Ademuyiwa, a Senior Lecturer of Russian Studies in the University of Ibadan once shared his experience with one of his students who became surprised about the modifications in Russian nouns in relation to Russian cases. According to him, the said student unconsciously retorted using the Yoruba language thus: "*O ma ga o. Igba wo ni kniga sare di knigu to tun di knige ni sin?*".

That explains why case system poses serious challenge for learners of Russian. But the singular fact is that Russian cases must be learnt thoroughly if a student wants to properly function effectively in the language. It is the sense of Russian cases that makes sentences meaningful in Russian grammar. This is justified in this paper thus: "A student is reading a book"

Here, we have the subject of the sentence (a student) and the object (a book). Of course, these senses of "subject" and "object" can still be maintained in Russian grammar. The case system will make us know which one is the subject (the doer of the action expressed by the verb) and which one is the object (the receiver of the action expressed by the verb). Let us consider this thus:

English: A student is reading a book.

	(Subject)	(verb)	(object)
Russian: (i)	" <u>Студент</u>	<u>читает</u>	<u>книга</u> "
	(Subject)	(verb)	(object)
Russian: (ii)	" <u>Книга</u>	<u>читает</u>	<u>студент</u> "
	(Subject)	(verb)	(object)
Russian: (iii)	" <u>Студент</u>	<u>читает</u>	<u>книгу</u> "
	(Subject)	(verb)	(object)

In the first two Russian instances (Russian i & ii), it becomes obvious that the objects are not properly represented. This is because the objects do not conform to the normal declension of Russian nouns to express the sense of object. Thus, both the subject (студент) and the object (книга) appear in the Nominative case. As a result of that, these sentences are considered to be wrong. But in the last instance (Russian iii), there is a modification to the object (книга changes to книгу). Here, the subject is in Nominative case while the object is expressed in Accusative case. Thus, this explains the fact that an action is performed on something.

Порядок Слов в Русском Языке (Word Order in Russian Sentences)

One of the uniqueness of the Russian language is the word order in sentences. Unlike English, a sentence of Russian can be rearranged and the sense in all the different arrangements will not be altered. Consider this:

(1) "Bill kills John".

In Russian grammar, the sentence above can be written in these various patterns and the sense will still be the same.

"Билл убивает Джона"

"Джона убивает Билл"

"Убивает Джона Билл"

"Убивает Билл Джона"

(2) "The boy eats sausage"

"Мальчик ест сосиску"

"Сосиску ест мальчик"

"Ест сосиску мальчик"

"Ест мальчик сосиску"

(3) "You will soon become a captain?"

"Вы скоро будете капитаном?"

"Капитаном вы скоро будете?"

"Скоро Капитаном вы будете?"

"Будете капитаном вы скоро?"

Generally, Russian language learners are usually confused at a level like this, particularly, when they are faced with translation task. A major concern in this context so far is that, it has been discovered that learners transliterate English sentence construction model into Russian. As a result, they come in contact with another great complexity. For example, sentences can be formed in Russian language without the presence of verb. Let us consider these instances.

- i. Кто это?
- ii. Где Гуманитарный Факультет?
- iii. Сколько вам лет?
- iv. Сколько сейчас времени?
- v. Это моя красивая сестра.
- vi. Я уже там!

From the examples above, each one makes a full sentence on its own respectively. But the major challenge is the absence of verbs.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In carrying out this research, Observation is used as the method to get to the roots of what has brought learners of Russian language into crossroads in the course of learning the language in Nigerian universities. In the course of the research, we are able to ascertain some varying factors that pose acquisition challenge to learners of Russian in Nigerian universities. The research also made it possible to determine the progress in Russian language acquisition among learners. It is pertinent to note that in different countries across the globe, the mode of study in universities vary significantly. It is discovered that most of the Nigerian students of Russian language, who graduated from university education in Russian, perceive oral colloquial speech much better than the lecture material in the classroom for communication convenience. This is due to the fact that in the course of the university training in the Russian language classes different types of speech activity are practiced. It should be noted that the problem of learners of Russian language in Nigerian universities is the inability to express themselves in the Russian language as a result of the pronunciation and communication challenges.

Most of the time, Russian language learners communicate with outright disregard to the rules of grammar. It only takes someone with vast knowledge in the language to ascertain students' errors. Many of these errors are attributed to verb conjugation, pronunciation, Russian case system, noun declension, among others. Most of the time,

the situation develops in such a way that the Russian students, having excellent knowledge of the teaching material in the classroom setting, have poor performance in certain communication setting. In the classes, it is important to improve all the skills of speech commitment. Students should be in interaction during the educational process. It should be noted that classroom training of students is significantly different societal language functioning. Thus, this showcases the interrelatedness between language and the speech community. In the case of foreign students, there is a sharp immersion in the language environment. Professionally, students' progress control nature plays an important role.

Therefore, in order to maintain the motivation for learning the Russian language, it is necessary to monitor students' progress in spontaneous communication. Generally, the motivation for learning the Russian language should be built in the Nigerian university students because most of the students who eventually study the language do not always choose to study the language at the tertiary levels. Also, the working mood of students on the way to gaining new knowledge is important. Russian language instructors or teachers need to make Russian learners acknowledge the importance of the need to improve their professional knowledge. This is very necessary because it ascertains the level of training of Nigerian students of Russian language. In addition to that, it will boost the interest and motivation of the Russian language learners for the Russian language that is being studied.

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