

A Comparative Study on the Fluency in French by Distance and Full Time Students. The Case Study of Kwame Nkrumah University

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Abstract:- This study investigated a comparative fluency in French by distance education and full time students learning French at Kwame Nkrumah University. Both distance and full time students were interviewed in French and their class lessons observed. The study revealed that distance students performed better in French and their academic results were better than their full time counterparts. Factors such as access and exposure to digital technologies such as social media and computers, quality modules and linguistic visit to French speaking countries are the main factors contributing to communicative fluency in French by distance education students at Kwame Nkrumah University. The study has made recommendations and proposals which will equally enable full time students improve their communicative ability in French as well. Among the recommendations were to encourage social networking among full time students through online French social groups and providing adequate study materials as those given to distance education students. French embassy was advised to reintroduce the programme of sending students studying French to Reunion or any other French speaking country in order to expose students to French civilization and culture. Parents were encouraged to provide their children in full time learning with digital technologies such as smart phones and laptops to enable them access modern language learning techniques online.

Key words: Social Media, Social Networking, Study Modules, Distance Education, Full Time, Communicative Fluency, digital technologies

I. BACKGROUND

In today's era, knowing a foreign language apart from your mother tongue has proved to be extremely significant. Whether learning for financial or social reasons, having the ability to communicate in a foreign language enables speakers make beneficial connections with other people and provides a better appreciation of one's culture.

For those students who do not have access to learn foreign languages through full time classroom learning, distance learning through electronic communication is the way to go. According to White (2003), distance education refers to the teaching and learning arrangement in which the learner and the teacher are separated by geography and time. In the same line, Shelly (2000) defines Distance education as an educational system in which learners can study in a flexible

manner in their own time, at pace of their choice and without requiring face to face contact with a teacher.

The department of Literature and Languages of Kwame Nkrumah University is one of the departments with the biggest number of students studying their programmes by distance learning. The department of Literature and Languages offers French as a teaching subject to both distance (serving teachers) and full time modes (pre-service). For a long time and each year, distance learning students outnumber the full time cohorts and showing better learning outcomes than the later. As observed by White (2000), rapid developments in information and communication technology, together with societal changes have increased awareness and demand for distance education.

Due to the advanced pedagogical techniques designed by the Directorate of Open and Distance Learning of Kwame Nkrumah University, a lot of potential students of French from all walks of life view Distance learning as the most flexible and convenient mode of learning. Blake (2017) states that Distance education is not a new phenomenon, what makes it appear new is the development and wide availability of the new technologies for connecting learners and teachers, and the publicity they have attracted. At Kwame Nkrumah University, more traditional forms of distance language learning that use print materials are being supplemented by opportunities for interaction and collaboration online.

On the other hand, students studying French through full time mode, which is exclusive contact with their faculties, have demonstrated slow pace of language fluency acquisition. Their communicative fluency in French seemed to be of elementary level compared to their distance education counterparts.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

At the pace with which technology and businesses are growing and improving the world over, it is no longer safe for one to remain a monolingual. Chishiba (2013) points out that in today's world, speaking foreign language such as French has numerous benefits. Students who are able to speak French will increase their chances of finding a well paying job, whether at home or abroad. Learning a foreign language has

the potential to enrich the mind and opens up new horizons, both at personal and professional level. Bayer (2005) records that job seekers, especially in the remote areas of Sindhi, are motivated to learn international official languages or majority languages by the desire to use these languages as tools for getting good jobs. Bayer (2005:98) remarks, "Besides, the demand from industries for employees who are fluent in either French or English has successfully encouraged job seekers to equip themselves with English or French." The findings by Bayer are in fact in agreement with Homes (1991) who observed that the knowledge of major international languages is a vital vehicle for well-paying jobs.

It has become a common practice world over to learn these foreign language especially French by distance or through online mode. White (2003) in her study, revealed that distance language learning has a lot of advantages compared to fulltime learning especially that learning takes place according to each learner's schedule and in different time zone, or it may take place at set times. She points out that with distance language learning, learning opportunities can be accessed at any time through print, video chats, CD-ROM, email and computer conference discussions. The study showed that distance education students participate in language social group fora where they discuss language as a subject.

A survey carried out by Banas (2006) revealed that Distance students are more committed to their studies than full time students. The study reports that one of the qualities that distance learners share is increased commitment to learning, higher levels of motivation and characteristics of a self starter. On the other hand a survey by Ahmed (2016) showed that on campus students use social media networking for social interaction rather than for academic purposes. The study revealed that youth primarily use these sites to stay in touch with friends they see often and those they see rarely. This high affinity for staying on social media for longer hours has a negative effect on academic performance for full time students.

Hachintu (2017) attributes this commitment and dedication to studies by distance students to the Directorate of Open and Distance learning's learner support services which are offered to students in form of counsel and advice. The study reports that the Directorate updates distance students about their academic progress and what to study.

III. PROBLEM STATEMENT

As stated earlier, this paper aims at investigating factors contributing to communicative fluency disparity between distance education and full time students at Kwame Nkrumah University. It has been observed every year that students studying by distance learning at Kwame Nkrumah University outnumber their full time counterparts. The study seeks to establish if there are any academic and communicative disparities between the two cohorts and further establish the reasons behind this linguistic difference.

IV. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of this paper are:

- (i) To establish communicative fluency disparities in French language between Distance and Full time students at Kwame Nkrumah university
- (ii) To establish factors contributing to communicative fluency in French between Distance and Full time students at Kwame Nkrumah University.
- (iii) To establish whether Distance education and Full time students have access to digital technologies at home.
- (iv) To establish whether the Directorate of Open and Distance offer learner support services to its students.

V. METHODOLOGY

(i) Research Design

The study employed both qualitative and quantitative methods to collect and analyse data. This concept of combining methods is used bearing in mind that any method used on its own has limitations and bias which could be reduced by using many approaches

(ii) Site Selection and Target Population

This study was conducted at Kwame Nkrumah University during the Distance education residential period and during Full time session. The target population was Distance education and full time students of French, lecturers of French and Directorate of Open and Distance Learning officers.

The sample included 30 students of French, two teachers of French and two officers from the Directorate of Open and Distance Learning.

Random sampling was used to select the 30 students of French. These 30 students were selected from both distance learning and full time students learning French. Purposive sampling was used to select the teachers of French and officers from the Directorate of Open and Distance learning. Ngoma (2006) defines purposive sampling as methods of sampling based on the judgment of the researcher regarding the characteristics of a representative sample from class teachers.

(iii) Data Collection

The study used the questionnaires, interviews, and observations as research instruments. The questionnaires were distributed to both full time and distance education students learning French at Kwame Nkrumah University. Interviews were carried out on lecturers of French and Directorate of Open and Distance education officers. The researcher also observed the use of District resource centre facilities by distance education students.

(iv) Data Analysis

Data collected by questionnaires was analyzed by use of the statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS) software.

Processing of the interview data included descriptive analysis and categorizing similar items into themes and sub-headings.

VI. FINDINGS

1. Analysis of the difference in language competence between distance education and full time students

Mode of learning	Language skill	Fluency	Percentage
Distance Education	Oral expression	Excellent	30
		Very good	45
		Good	15
		Fair	10
	Written expression	Excellent	32
		Very good	40
		Good	16
		Fair	12
Full time	Oral expression	Excellent	15
		Very good	18
		Good	40
		Fair	27
	Written expression	Excellent	14
		Very good	19
		Good	43
		Fair	24

Based on the findings of the communicative competency investigation, there is significant disparity of communicative fluency between distance and full time students at Kwame Nkrumah University. The results showed that about 30 to 40 percent of the distance education students were excellent and very good at French expression respectively. On the other hand, less than twenty percent of full time student were excellent and good at oral and written French respectively. The researcher analyzed end of year French practical results from the French section.

2. Factors contributing to the disparities

(i) Use and access to digital technologies

Findings from distance students through questionnaires revealed that almost every distance student had a laptop which was connected to internet either through wireless provided by the university or through personal dongles. It was also revealed that all students of French belong to a French social group on whatsapp where French issues are discussed using French as medium of communication. 85 percent of the distance education students indicated that they used internet sites to access language notes and library services. However, this was not the case with the full time students. Most of the

full time students did not have these digital technologies except their mobile phones.

(ii) Provision of quality study modules

Responses from teachers of French revealed that students learning French by distance education are provided with quality study modules with detailed information on topics in courses taught. Unlike their fulltime counterparts who to the large extent, rely on lecture notes in class, distance students have the necessary notes on their fingertips through study modules.

(iii) Study visits to French speaking countries

The study also revealed that most of the teachers who studied French through distance mode had been to either Burundi or Reunion for French cultural and civilization study. These visits to French speaking countries by teachers of French have enhanced the rapid acquisition of French language by these teachers. It has been proved by many language studies that learning a foreign language through its culture is the most effective way of learning a foreign language.

(iv) Learner support services.

Through structured interviews with Directorate of Open and Distance Learning staff, the findings revealed that the Learner Support Department of Directorate of Open and Distance Learning offers support to distance learners in form of counsel on what to study and has opened ten learner support centres in each Provincial centre throughout the country.

(v) Self discipline, dedication and commitment to studies

Lecturers of French and Directorate staff revealed that most of the distance students are parents with families; as a result they maintain high level of discipline. Knowing that they are bread winners, and bearing in mind that they have to work hard to raise fees for their termly studies, they put much effort so as to avoid failing their courses and complete their studies within the academic period.

VII. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

This study was aimed at comparing the communicative competency in French language between distance and full time students. The study revealed that distance education students perform better than their full time counterparts in terms of French communication. Generally, distance education students were able to communicate fluently both through written and oral expression. The findings of this study have shown that distance language learning is becoming a very common mode of lesson delivery whether by traditional blended or fully online formats. The study strongly highlights that the advancement of digital technologies, especially social media has facilitated the positive progress of language learning among distance education students. In fact, distance education students are taking advantage of social interacting on social media to share and discuss pertinent language issues amongst themselves. Through these social media groups like

whatsapp and face book, distance education students are creating a practical platform on which they can use French as good as a normal and natural speech environment. The study has also revealed that the exposure to French culture by distance students has also facilitated the rapid acquisition of the foreign language.

What one can point out without any fear of being biased is that the distance students are more committed to their studies than the full time. They study at home at their own time and pace and meet the deadlines for submission of their assignments and pay the required fees on time. This commitment is attributed to their home responsibilities and the economic hardships they shoulder. These financial and economic hardships compel them to study hard and complete their studies within the stipulated academic calendar.

Although distance education students do not have adequate face to face time with their lecturers, they are frequently in contact with either their course lecturers or the Head of Learner support department. Although some of the students may not have access to libraries in their remote homes, the study modules they are given are very useful as they have all the necessary information and details for the courses studied. This is the pillar on which distance education is anchored. The provision of quality study modules puts the mind of a distant student at rest, as he or she has the “teacher” at home.

VIII. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study has established that there are communicative fluency disparities in French between distance and full time students at Kwame Nkrumah University. It has been revealed that distance education students’ academic performance in French is better than their full time counterparts. The study has also established factors contributing to communicative fluency in French by distance education students at Kwame Nkrumah University. It has been established that the use of digital technologies such as social media and mobile electronic tools play a vital role in facilitating the learning of

French by distance students at Kwame Nkrumah University. It has also been revealed that the programme of visiting French speaking countries by students is a positive factor that facilitates acquisition of French. Additionally, their discipline and commitment to studies coupled with regular counseling by learner support department is one of the factors facilitating good academic performance by distance students.

The study therefore recommends that the French embassy should reintroduce the programme of sending students of French speaking countries in order to expose students and teachers to French culture and civilization. The study recommends that course lecturers should digitalize their language lectures for full time students through the use of digital and electronic tools in order to access modern language teaching techniques online and electronic media. The ICT Department of the University should improve and make wireless internet available in all locations of the university in order to enable students access it even in their hostels.

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