

Oral French in a Global Economy: Implications, Challenges, and Strategies

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Abstract

The world is witnessing a knowledge-driven global economy. By the same token, increasing demand for communication-related skills places a high premium on bilinguals. Given such a scenario, the onus falls on stakeholders in French Language Teacher Education to provide the much-needed bilingual drivers of the global economy. From that perspective, teachers of oral French have a non-negligible role to play in the overall task of fostering and sustaining the supply of bilingual entrants into the global economy. However, not all teachers of oral French have been adequately prepared for the job, due in large part to the fact that modern trends in the teaching of oral French are, undoubtedly, at odds with practices of yesteryears. Thus, whoever aspires to teach oral French ought to come to terms with the nature of the profession, regarding recognizing its pedagogical implications, exhibiting dynamism in dealing with the possible challenges associated with the career as well as being innovative and resourceful in the area of identifying and applying learner-friendly result-oriented strategies.

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This article, thus, canvases for the importance of oral French about the global economy, as well as create an awareness of possible institutional challenges that may pose challenges to the effective teaching of oral French. A way to overcome articulated and envisaged challenges discussed calls for an activity-driven methodology rich in pedagogical strategies that make the practice and use of French come alive whether or not there are noticeable institutional challenges.

Introduction

The undeniable reality of our time is that the world is a global village; operating a global economy of which there are many drivers including bilinguals. The question is, "Who are these bilinguals and where are they from?" Regarding who they are, we can simply say that a bilingual is one who can communicate effectively in two languages, and for the avoidance of doubt, strictly speaking, the language type under focus is the spoken word and not sign language. From that perspective, bilinguals could be in diverse areas of human endeavour, including public relations, human resource management, advertising, tourism, broadcast journalism. They could be marketers, hoteliers, diplomats, desk officers, management executives, and the like. They could even be doctors, social workers, lawyers, secretaries, accountants, air hostesses, interpreters, and evangelists. They could be in the maritime industries, customs, and immigration or even in the entertainment industry. In short, the list of skilled bilingual professionals can hardly be exhaustive. Simply put, bilinguals are men and women whose skills in their particular areas of calling are not in doubt but whose ability to communicate in two or more Languages of Wider Communication (LWCs) will indeed make a difference. The issue of LWCs will engage our attention later in this presentation.

Central to this article is to identify whose responsibility it is to produce bilinguals and also the stages leading to bilingualism. From a general perspective, a bilingual professional is the result of a process of education. Therefore, the education industry, on a general note, is responsible for providing bilinguals. However, this responsibility can be narrowed down to the Language Education Highway (LEH), where there are teachers. These teachers are the

outcome of Teacher Education no doubt. Better still, bilinguals are products of French Language Teacher Education. Therefore, in effect, the onus of providing the bilingual drivers of the global economy lies in French Language Teacher Education as a sub-sector of the General Education process.

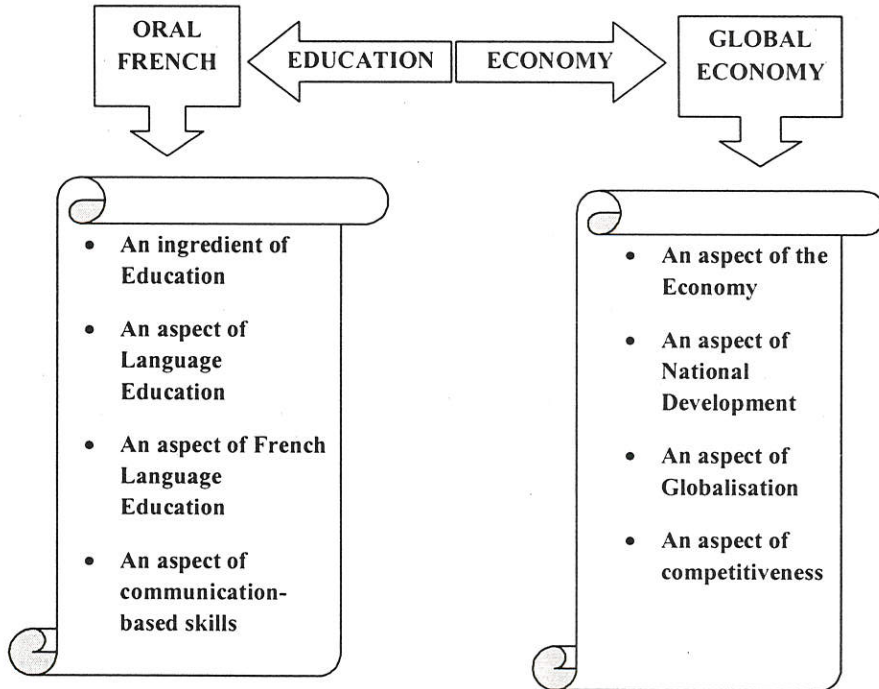
Some standardised processes lead to bilingualism. These could be through a natural acquisition process without schooling, through continuing education process (rather referred to as second chance) or through initial formal L2 teaching/learning process (that is known as first chance). For the purpose of this paper, we are interested in the bilingualism that results from a first chance process. To that extent, candidates to bilingualism can be recruited through a feeder mechanism, linking the secondary school to the tertiary education sector (Mbanefo, 2007). The argument here is that it takes a long journey to bilingualism. In realistic terms, the early years of secondary school contact with the French language are very critical because the kind of interest that will lead one ultimately to becoming bilingual is developed and sustained at this stage. The role of the French language teacher as a change agent is crucial here so as not to lose many potential candidates to bilingualism due to a teacher's ineptitude. Therefore, it is not just that the teacher is the key player in recruiting potential bilinguals, but equally it can insist on the necessity of providing good quality teachers, to guarantee secondary schools remaining the preferred haven for efficient sourcing of possible bilinguals. By the same token, this advocacy presupposes a robust training programme that ensures for its recipients not only a solid base in education core courses but also an excellent grasp of many written aspects of the language as well as an impeccable command of oral French. Without equivocation, however, while not negating the value of written French, oral French is the principal focus of this paper because, in practical terms of mastery of the language, spoken French is an indispensable working tool for a bilingual; because it is this aspect that confirms one's claim to bilingualism. To that extent, oral French should be given prominence in French Teacher Education programmes. In this paper, therefore, the emphasis is on three issues namely; to highlight the implications of linking oral French and the global economy, identify the

challenges militating against the effective teaching of oral French and propose pedagogical strategies capable of enhancing the teaching of oral French.

Oral French in a Global Economy: Concepts and Implications

Understanding the Concepts through a Satellite Approach

“Oral French in a Global Economy,” is a paradigm with underlying implications that requires a clear understanding of the concepts. In this section, a conceptual framework that permits the emergence of those implications is pertinent. The question is “What are the concepts derivable from this paradigm?” Fragmented into two separate chunks, the model names, oral French, on the one hand, and global economy, on the other. The take-off position is that oral French has a place in the global economy. Therefore, the two blocks are related with the former having a place in the latter. Hence, it is important to understand this link. However, to facilitate such thoughtfulness, it would be useful to adopt a satellite approach in developing a conceptual framework around each block of the paradigm. Such calls for a move closer to a bigger picture of the sub-theme - “Education and Economic Growth,” an approach that accommodates two satellites namely, Education and Economy. The question is: “how do the two blocks in the paradigm relate to these



two satellites?” The schema below illustrates this relationship:
Figure 1: Schema showing the satellite approach

So far, the effective paradigm for this paper is “Oral French in a Global Economy.” With it emerged a conceptual framework, a satellite approach that brought about the development of two blocks; Oral French, and Global Economy, which further lodges into the umbrella domains of Education and Economy, respectively. A further breakdown of the concept of oral French left us with assertions to the effect that, regarding being an ingredient of Education (specifically that of Language Education or French Language Education), it is a communication-based skill and a valuable tool in bilingualism. By the same analogy, a further breakdown of Global Economy threw up the perspective of it being an aspect of the Economy, having to do not only with National Development but also with Globalisation which commands a sense of competitiveness. Having come up with the previous assertions about Oral French and Global Economy and considering our take-off position that Oral

French has a place in the Global Economy, the need to demonstrate how the realities in the two satellites relate with one another becomes pertinent, and that requires galvanizing them into a summarized conceptual framework.

Summarizing our conceptual framework

By way of summary, the theoretical framework here links oral French to the Global Economy. Furthermore, going by the realities in the two satellites, we can only conclude by stating that the framework involves linking Education to the Economy, linking Language Education to the Economy, linking French to the Economy, and linking bilingualism to the Global Economy. Hence, the underlying implications of these links require explication in the lines that follow.

Consequences of the link between Education and the Economy

What is the link between Education and the Economy? Education prepares one for a living, and as demonstrated in Mbanefo (2009 and 2011), that aim can be seen to be achieved when the products of education are gainfully employed, thereby constituting the labour force in an economy. When we are talking about the economy or economic activity, we are simply referring to actions that involve the production, distribution and consumption of goods and services at all levels within a society. Thus, in developmental studies (Obasanjo & Mabogunje, 1991), education is considered to be the bedrock of national development. From that perspective, an education system that is responsive to the requirements of the labour market helps in stimulating and fostering economic growth. It is in that light that one can view the role of Language Education in the economy.

Implications of the link between Language Education and the Economy

What is the connection between Language Education and the Economy? Language Education plays an important role in the economy. Furthermore, the importance of language-related qualifications, particularly in the light of the high demand placed

on communication-based skills cannot be undervalued. In fact, in an earlier write-up (Mbanefo 2003) had discussed the relationship between language and the individual extensively, emphasizing the double role usually ascribed to language in the life of a person at the workplace. At that level, language not only boosts the ego of the one that speaks it but also, in some cases it constitutes a service to be delivered (see also Jernudd & Sung-Hwan, 1985 and Lindblom-Leary, 2000). In that case, Language Education is a good ally in developing the profile of individuals in an economy.

However, if language ordinarily plays such an important role in the everyday life of a person working in an environment, its role is all the more crucial when it has to do with an interplay between the spheres of influence of a given language and the relevance of an individual's oral biography. From Linguistic Anthropology, a particular language may fall into the category known as LWCs (see Brann, 1978). Regarding status, some of these LWCs are foreign languages. Relating to the relevance of an individual's linguistic biography, this may be limited to a local level of communication or an all-inclusive international level (see Bamgbose, 1991). The implication is that if Language Education prepares one to fit into an economy, Foreign Language Education provides even greater leverage to one's economic potentials, given that it addresses the communication need of people with an international vision. That brings us to the question of the link between French and the economy.

Implications of the link between French and the Economy

What is the relationship between French and the economy? Beside English as a foremost LWC, French is an LWC with an incredible vista of influence either as a first or official/co-official language in some countries, serving as a second language for some countries in Africa, Middle East and Asia, being taught and used as a foreign language in countries like Nigeria and Ghana, being retained as one of the official languages of communication of the United Nations, the European Union, UNESCO and NATO (see Kuupole, 2012). From our African historical perspective, our colonial history left us the legacy of these two LWCs. It is true that English is surely

a language of business anytime any day and so, coming from an Anglophone background, one could argue that English is a sufficient working tool, implying that it may not be necessary to engage in a further language acquisition quest. However, it is crucial to differ from that standpoint, particularly because of the reality of globalization where boundaries are receding rapidly, in the light of businesses being delocalised, thereby bringing about a widening influence of a global economy. This increasing influence of a world economy is throwing up many relevant options, chief among which is the quest for bilingualism, prompting us to consider its link with the global economy.

Implications of the link between bilingualism and the global economy

What is the connection between bilingualism and the world economy? We can simply explain the relationship by saying that bilingualism entails complete mastery of two LWCs. Regarding the global economy, it is to be noted that the wider the zone of economic activity, the more the relevance of LWCs. Given that scenario, it would be an understatement to infer that the global economy is catching up with individuals and countries of various divides. Certainly, keen watchers of modern trends would readily attest to the fact that the fastest lane is that gurus occupied skilled manpower with an impressive multilingual portfolio as an added advantage. Those who understand this phenomenon (the “Asian Tigers” with their pedigree of dominating the global economy) rank high among international students cueing up for immersion programmes. The inference here is that the Asian nationals are ever so present and in their large numbers in places offering such immersion programmes in France, for instance, (CAREL in Royan, CAVILAM in Vichy, CLA in Besançon, CUEF in Grenoble, among others). Besides, in such immersion programmes emphasis is usually on oral French and for good reason, prompting us to complete our review of the implications of the remark that the mastery of oral French is the hallmark of excellence in the communication kit of a skilled bilingual individual.

We set out in this preliminary aspect of our paper with the objective of developing a conceptual framework on the two major constructs in our topic, namely oral French and global economy. A satellite approach adopted for this paper links oral French and the world economy. Based on that, we were obliged to explain the implications of that link. Apart from those explanations, preliminary remarks, thus far, have identified the key players in the overall business of providing skilled bilingual individuals for driving the global economy. It is of note that the bilingual drivers of the economy are products of an umbrella education system that ensures a robust French Language Teacher Education that equally empowers French teachers, particularly those involved in the teaching of oral French, through the right kind of training. Undoubtedly, the teacher is the one whose duty it is to get the student to talk. Moreover, that can only happen if the teacher is empowered sufficiently at training. In other words, if the teacher cannot talk (as often is the case), then there is a fundamental problem, which explains why one may be tempted to ask such questions like:

- Are the teachers empowered?
- If so, to what extent are those teachers of oral French empowered?
- What challenges (if any) are the teachers facing?

In attempting to provide answers to the preceding questions, we shall be reflecting on the challenges of teaching Oral French at the tertiary level and that will form the focus of the next section of our paper.

Overview of the Challenges to the Effective Teaching of Oral French

This section of our paper is focusing on institutional challenges and inadequacies, two constructs that feature like leitmotifs. Our starting point, therefore, will be an overview of their nature, how they relate to one another and how we intend to use them in this paper. The rest of the section will identify the real challenges under focus in this article.

Understanding the two constructs of challenges and inadequacies

What is a challenge? Put simply; a challenge is a stimulating or interesting task or problem. What does it mean to challenge? A challenge stimulates or arouses, especially by presenting difficulties. What is an inadequacy? In other words, inadequacies define a condition of something not being available, not being appropriate or suitable. What is the relationship between the two constructs and how do they apply to the position of this paper? Challenges are of diverse sorts but, as far as this article is concerned, the particular type that is under focus can best be summed up as institutional inadequacies. The implication is that; there is necessarily a link between the two constructs. Concerning the term inadequacy or regarding shortfalls, is a condition of something not meeting the expected level of supply.

A position on challenges and inadequacies

The general view that is likely to be adopted when dealing with challenges is probably to sound defeatist. By the same token, the general tendency toward inadequacies may be that of cynicism and rash destructive criticism. Those two normal positions vis-à-vis challenges and inadequacies are rather negative and do not fit into the two constructs in this paper. Rather, these challenges or institutional shortcomings, as the case may be, seem to provide a fertile ground for self-discovery and innovative practice in the teaching of spoken French.

Furthermore, seeded in the theory canvassed here is the terminology 'institutional', an idea derivable from the term institution, which is simply an establishment or an organisation. There are many types of institutions ranging from political to social, judicial, and so forth. However, the institutions pertinent to this discussion are those in the educational system. Of a fact, while admitting that the school system is replete with such institutions of varying degrees of influence and responsibilities like government agencies, Ministries of Education, Examination bodies and so on, it is worthy of note that the particular focus of this paper is the school as an institution. Against such a backdrop, the school is the theatre

of formal teaching/learning. As regards the frame of institutional challenges or inadequacies, the question is: “What are some of the requirements that are mandatory to enable learning to take place?” In sum, they include the teacher, space, time, and equipment, and if any of them is lacking or in short supply, it is an institutional problem or inadequacy. That is why institutional challenges or inadequacies are requirements that should normally be made available by the institution but which are either lacking or in short supply.

Having identified items whose absence or lack may constitute challenges to effective teaching, an overview of the ones that come under focus in this article on the teaching of oral French is needed. While operating in Ghana, from a Sabbatical vantage point of teaching oral French across board to all the students enrolled for French at the Department of French Education in the University of Education, Winneba, an experience that has enabled the isolation of certain shortfalls, having to do with Teacher-student Ratio (TSR for short), Curricular weighting of oral French, Teaching Environment and Teaching methodology. Just a few lines will do in explaining these shortfalls.

Shortfalls in the TSR

Relating a personal experience is crucial here as one solely responsible for the teaching of oral French to the entire student population of well over 300 students. In their individual classes, the TSR ranges between 1-32 and 1- 44, defying the international best practice ratio of 1-16 and 1-20 for classes of ‘*Français langue étrangère*’ (FLE for short). This situation is a clear indication that teachers of oral French are inadequate in this institution.

Shortfalls in the Curricular Weighting of Oral French

The inference here is the near orphan status accorded to oral French in the scheme of things. Hence, regarding credit hour weighting, the oral expression is just a one credit hour course. Besides, it is tucked away as an adjunct accounting for 1/3 of other language courses labelled differently according to the three years as follows:

- Year 1 FRC 121.2 – French Structure and Usage I

- Year 2 FRC 242.2 – Textual Analysis and Oral Expression
- Year 3 FRC 361.2 – Semiotic and Oral Expression

Shortfalls in the Teaching Environment

The environment of instruction in the classroom better favours a frontal approach to language teaching. The long heavy desks attached to equally heavy wooden benches do not allow flexibility, at least not the kind that favours the practice of participatory pedagogy (see Mbanefo 2000).

Shortfalls in the Teaching Methodology

Rather than being taught as FLE, a practice that negates teaching French as an ordinary subject but rather emphasises the practical nature and specificities of oral French, the prevailing practice reflects bookish French. It is against this backdrop that an activity-driven oral French methodology has become pertinent. The aim is to help these student teachers increase their productivity in spoken French as well as to sensitize them on the myriad of strategies of increasing productivity in oral French. What are these pedagogical strategies? The next section of our paper explains pedagogical strategies and their value.

Strategies

This section states the nature of an on-going research carried out in an oral French class. It is the result of an experiment conducted with the level 100 students during the first semester of 2013; which implied extending the experiment on a large scale. Having observed the results as indicated in the students' performance, the university authority approved a mandate to teach oral French across the board. The details of the experiment will form the object of discussion in another paper meanwhile the strategies will only be presented in a sketchy manner and grouped according to the shortfalls under focus.

Strategies for dealing with inappropriate TSR

The under listed strategies became valuable in addressing

inappropriate TSR considering that in an ideal FLE environment, the teacher/student ratio is 1-20 maximum?

- Grouping the students
- Instituting intergroup/intragroup peer censorship
- Encouraging student autonomy
- Providing assignments with inbuilt self-pacing mechanism
- Deemphasising teacher presence

Strategies for tackling curricular weighting

What strategies could have been adequate to address this problem considering that the curricular weighting of 1 credit hour allocated to oral French is grossly inadequate? Driven by a teaching philosophy that aims at achieving more within a limited time, the strategies contrived included the following:

- Increase in content
 - Co-construction of content
 - Extending frontiers beyond the classroom
 - Growth in speech time to students
 - Awareness of time management
 - Focusing on weekly contents
 - Capacity building in lexical universe
 - Encouraging anticipation
 - Generating teaching support items
 - Initiating “*Le coin français*”, a French Radio phone-in programme
- Strategies for tackling space*

In another instance, the need to cope with inappropriate teaching environment demanded the following:

- Changing the sitting arrangement
- Introducing speech direction dynamics
- Allowing for interpellation/accosting
- Encouraging turn taking

- Total environmental transformation

Strategies for tackling methodology

What strategies would enhance the FLE methodology? Here it became expedient to endorse FLE with innovative strategies that allowed for:

- Automatic participation involving every student
- Cultural ventilation
- Diversity of activities
- Diversity of roles and responsibilities
- Endorsing production in the place of consumption
- Innovation with the pedagogy of journalism
- Role playing
- Spontaneous speech
- Using constraint to induce productivity
- Building and sustaining interest
- Encouraging curiosity
- Encouraging learning by over learning
- Encouraging learning by doing
- Creating a carrying voice

Conclusion

The major concern of this article has been the issue of satisfying the increasing demand for skilled bilingual professionals to drive the global economy. Having placed the satisfaction of that demand at the doorstep of French Language Teacher Education, with emphasis on oral French, it became necessary not only to explain the implications of linking oral French to the global economy and to identify some institutional challenges bedevilling the effective teaching of oral French, but also, and more importantly, to propose some pedagogical strategies that are borne out of practical teaching experience.

Some of the implications included the facts that: there is a link between Education and the economy; there is a relationship between Language Education and the economy; there is a relationship

between oral French and the economy, and there is a connection between bilingualism and the global economy. The relationship between education and the economy was explained in the light of teaching being the bedrock of national development which in itself entails sustained economic growth. The tie between Language Education and the Economy was virtually the one of Foreign Language Education and the economy, where the former redefines an individual's relevance vis-à-vis the exigencies of the latter. Paramount among such exigencies is economic competitiveness that requires bilingualism. As touching on oral French and the global economy, we posited that mastery of oral French was clearly a much-needed endorsement to one's claim to being rightfully a bilingual. Four major institutional challenges were identified having to do with the teacher-pupil ratio, curricular weighting, teaching environment and teaching methodology. Having observed that contrary to international/pedagogical best practice regarding the teacher-pupil ratio, the reality on the ground was quite disparaging. Strategies were also proposed to deal with each of the identified challenges. Measures adopted to counter an imbalance in the teacher-pupil ratio included grouping the students, allowing for peer censorship, introducing self-pacing mechanisms, and guiding them to autonomy by assigning them leadership roles. Rather than remain an inconsequential adjunct, oral French took on an epic proportion through an implicit silent revolution, which became influenced by an all-embracing activity curriculum that spread its tentacles far beyond the scope of the official time allocation. To overcome shortcomings in the classroom teaching environment a total transformation of the sitting arrangement which brought in its wake other equally exciting strategies like speech direction dynamics, spontaneous interpellation/accosting as well as turn taking. In the area of methodology, the strategies included, among other things, cultural ventilation, productivity, total participation as well as an innovative pedagogy of journalism.

The Ghanaian springboard notwithstanding, the thoughts shared in this article are of global relevance. Moreover, even though the paper could be considered either as a treatise on best practice in the teaching of oral French or as a wake-up call for stakeholders in

the area of French Language Teacher Education, it has barely activated perspectives of yet unanswered questions in other possible areas of concern on the French Language Education Highway and how it can always maintain its link with the dynamics of global economy. Might it not be necessary to consider a curriculum overhaul? What if we considered regular retraining for teachers of Oral French? What if more space creatively became handy for an interuniversity conversation on multilingual matters?

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