Enhancing Language Learning Through Cultural Immersion: Prospects and Challenges in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examines prospects and challenges of implementing cultural immersion in language learning programmes in Nigerian schools. Language learning and cultural immersion are critical for developing cross-cultural competence and promoting language proficiency. However, there are various challenges, including limited resources, access to native speakers, resistance to change, lack of support for teachers, limited opportunities for real-world immersion, resistance to language policy changes, and limited research on the effectiveness of cultural immersion activities. To address these challenges, this paper recommends several solutions, including partnering with other schools or organizations, seeking grants or funding, using technology to enhance cultural immersion experiences, providing professional development opportunities and resources for teachers, creating support networks or communities of practice, promoting real-world immersion experiences, engaging with policymakers to promote policies that support language learning and cultural exchange, and conducting research to evaluate the effectiveness of cultural immersion activities. By adopting best practices for cultural immersion in language learning programmes, Nigerian schools can enhance language learning and cross-cultural competence among their students.

Key word: Language learning, Cultural immersion, Language policy, Challenges, Prospects

Introduction

Language learning is an important aspect of education in today's globalized world. It enables individuals to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds, thereby promoting intercultural understanding and harmony. One of the best ways to enhance language learning is through cultural immersion, which refers to the process of experiencing and participating in a foreign culture as a means of acquiring language skills. Cultural immersion has been found to be an effective way of improving language learning outcomes, as it provides learners with opportunities to engage with native speakers, learn about the culture, and develop cultural competence.

In the Nigerian context, language learning and cultural immersion have become increasingly important, given the country's rich cultural diversity and multilingualism. Nigeria has over 500 languages, making it one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world. However, the dominant languages in Nigeria are English, Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa, and most Nigerians are bilingual or multilingual. Despite this linguistic diversity, language learning in Nigerian schools has been characterized by rote memorization and grammar drills, which limit learners' ability to communicate effectively in real-life situations.

To address this challenge, many Nigerian schools are adopting cultural immersion approaches to language learning, which involve exposing learners to authentic language use and cultural experiences. This paper aims to review the prospects and challenges in implementing cultural immersion in Nigerian schools. The objective of this paper is to provide insights and recommendations for educators, policymakers, and language learners on how to enhance language learning through cultural immersion in the Nigerian context.

With Nigeria's linguistic status, language learning and cultural immersion becomes critical components for developing cross-cultural competence, promoting language proficiency, and fostering national unity. However, the current educational system in Nigeria does not adequately integrate language learning and cultural immersion. The teaching of languages in schools is mainly limited to classroom instruction, which does not allow for the full integration of cultural immersion experiences that enhance language learning.

This paper examines the prospects and challenges of enhancing language learning through cultural immersion in Nigerian schools. The paper argues that cultural immersion is an essential tool for developing students' language proficiency and cross-cultural competence. Furthermore, the paper examines the various challenges facing the implementation of cultural immersion programmes in Nigerian schools, including limited resources, access to native speakers, resistance to change, lack of support for teachers, limited opportunities for real-world immersion, resistance to language policy changes, and limited research on the effectiveness of cultural immersion activities.

The first section of the paper provides a brief overview of the current state of language education in Nigeria, highlighting the importance of cultural immersion in language learning. The second section discusses the benefits of cultural immersion in language learning and the need to integrate cultural immersion experiences into language teaching. The

third section of the paper examines the challenges facing the implementation of cultural immersion programmes in Nigerian schools. The fourth section offers recommendations for addressing these challenges and enhancing cultural immersion in language learning in Nigerian schools.

The current state of Language Education in Nigeria

Nigeria is a linguistically and culturally diverse country with over 500 indigenous languages (Makinde, 2018). However, the educational system in Nigeria has placed more emphasis on English as the medium of instruction and national language, to the detriment of other Nigerian languages. According to the National Policy on Education (NPE) in Nigeria, the teaching of Nigerian languages is mandatory in all primary and secondary schools (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004). The policy aims to promote the teaching and learning of Nigerian languages and cultures in order to preserve and promote the country's cultural heritage. However, the teaching of these languages is mainly limited to classroom instruction, which does not allow for the full integration of cultural immersion experiences that enhance language learning. Furthermore, the teaching of Nigerian languages is often neglected in schools, especially in urban areas where English is the dominant language. This neglect has resulted in a decline in the use and preservation of Nigerian languages, as younger generations prefer to communicate in English (Adebayo, 2017). As a result, there is a growing concern that Nigerian languages are at risk of becoming endangered, as fewer people are fluent in them. In addition, the lack of qualified language teachers and teaching materials has also hindered the effective teaching and learning of Nigerian languages in schools (Ajiboye & Atanda, 2017).

Many schools do not have enough language teachers, and the ones available often lack the necessary skills and training to effectively teach the languages. Furthermore, the teaching materials available are often outdated and inadequate for effective language learning. These challenges have led to a decline in the use and preservation of Nigerian languages, and have also hindered the development of multilingualism and cultural diversity in Nigeria.

There is a growing need to reform the current educational system in Nigeria to promote the teaching and learning of Nigerian languages and cultures, and to incorporate cultural immersion experiences in language teaching to enhance language learning. Cultural immersion experiences involve exposing learners to the target language and culture in real-life situations, rather than just in the classroom. This approach enhances language learning by providing learners with authentic language use and cultural experiences. According to Ezeani (2018), cultural immersion experiences have the potential to increase learners' motivation and interest in language learning, and to promote cultural understanding and diversity. However, the implementation of cultural immersion experiences in language teaching in Nigeria faces several challenges. Therefore, the need for this study arises to explore the benefits and challenges bedeviling the implementation of the approach in Nigeria.

Literature Review

Cultural immersion is a process of engaging in authentic cultural experiences that enable learners to interact with native speakers, learn about the culture, and develop cultural competence (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Jackson, 2011). This approach emphasizes the importance of context and culture in language learning and recognizes that language cannot be divorced from culture (Kramsch, 1993). According to Kramsch (1993), cultural immersion is based on the socio-cultural approach to language learning, which emphasizes the role of social interaction in language acquisition.

In addition, Cultural immersion is a process of experiencing and learning about the culture of a target language in a manner that is more engaging and active. It goes beyond the classroom setting where learners can participate in activities and interact with native speakers of the target language in their natural environment. According to Olatunji (2016), cultural immersion is essential in language learning as it facilitates the acquisition of not only the linguistic aspects of a language but also the cultural components. It is a concept that has been widely debated in literature. Olatunji (2016) defines cultural immersion as a process that involves living and experiencing a new culture as part of a learning experience. It encompasses activities such as attending cultural events, visiting historical sites, staying with host families, and participating in local traditions. Cultural immersion enables learners to interact with native speakers of the target language and understand their cultural norms and values.

Theoretical Frameworks Supporting Cultural Immersion in Language Learning

Several theoretical frameworks support the use of cultural immersion in language learning. One of such framework is sociocultural theory (SCT). SCT, as proposed by Vygotsky (1978), emphasizes the importance of social interaction in the learning process. The theory posits that learning occurs through the interaction between individuals and the environment. This theory has been used to explain the role of cultural immersion in language learning. According to Hwang (2019), cultural immersion activities provide learners with opportunities to interact with native speakers of the target language and negotiate meaning in social contexts, which leads to the development of intercultural communicative competence.

Another theoretical framework that supports the use of cultural immersion in language learning is the cognitive-interactionist approach. This approach emphasizes the importance of meaningful interaction in language learning. According to Swain (1995), output is essential in the language learning process as it facilitates the negotiation of meaning and the development of language proficiency. Cultural immersion activities provide learners with opportunities to practice their language skills in a meaningful context, which leads to the development of language proficiency.

Several studies have examined the effectiveness of cultural immersion in language learning in the past. Takemura (2016) conducted a case study on the use of cultural immersion in Japanese language education in Australia. The study found out that cultural immersion activities such as watching Japanese films, attending cultural events, and visiting historical sites had a positive impact on learners' motivation and language proficiency.

Nwadike (2019) conducted a study on language immersion in Nigerian schools, focusing on the American International School of Lagos. The study found out that cultural immersion activities such as field trips, cultural celebrations, and language exchanges had a positive impact on learners' intercultural communicative competence and language proficiency.

Cultural Immersion programmes and their Implementation in schools

In Nigeria, language learning in schools has traditionally been focused on grammar and vocabulary drills, with little emphasis on communicative competence and cultural awareness. However, in recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of cultural immersion in language learning. Many schools in Nigeria are now adopting cultural immersion approaches to language learning, which involve exposing learners to authentic language use and cultural experiences.

One example of a school implementing cultural immersion in language learning is the Lagos State Model College in Meiran, Lagos. The school has adopted a bilingual education programme that emphasizes the use of both English and Yoruba languages in instruction. The programme includes cultural immersion activities such as field trips to cultural sites, interaction with native speakers, and cultural performances. The school has reported positive outcomes, including improved language proficiency, cultural awareness, and academic performance (Olatunji, 2016).

Another example is the American International School of Lagos, which has a language immersion programme that involves teaching subjects such as science, mathematics, and social studies in French, Spanish, or Mandarin. The programme also includes cultural immersion activities such as food tasting, cultural festivals, and cultural performances. The school has reported positive outcomes, including improved language proficiency, cultural awareness, and academic performance (Nwadike, 2019).

In addition, there is Yoruba Immersion Programme offered by the Institute of African and Diaspora Studies at the University of Lagos, now known as the Yoruba Language and Culture Immersion Programme (YLCIP). This unique programme aims to provide non-native speakers with the necessary skills, knowledge, and proficiency in Yoruba language and culture. It is a ground-breaking initiative that caters for students and other interested learners, including researchers, who require firsthand experience in data gathering and interviewing within Yoruba-speaking communities. The programme features a team of highly qualified teachers with extensive experience in teaching Yoruba to learners from multicultural and multilingual backgrounds.

Furthermore, there is the Nigeria French Language Village (NFLV) in Badagry, Lagos. Established in December 1991, the Nigeria French Language Village (NFLV) operates as an Inter-University Centre for French studies under the National Universities Commission (NUC). Its primary goal is to provide Language Immersion Programme (LIP) as a local alternative to the mandatory year-abroad component of B.A/B.Ed French programmes in Nigerian universities, as well as an acculturation programme for French students in Nigerian Colleges of Education. The NFLV is a service-oriented institution that provides distinctive services to Federal, State, and Private Nigerian universities, Colleges of Education, and recently, some Polytechnics offering Bilingual Secretarial Studies. These services enable Nigeria to preserve foreign exchange that would have been expended on the sponsorship of Nigerian students abroad. What sets NFLV apart is that it is the only French language institution of its kind in a non-francophone environment. Since its inception, the Village has mobilized available human and material resources to promote the effective study and learning of French in Nigeria.

Apart from the above, the following are also other language immersion programme centres in Nigeria;

1. Centre for Language and Communication Studies, University of Port Harcourt: The Centre offers language immersion programmes in French, German, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese.
2. Arabic Language Village, Borno State: The Arabic Language Village is an immersion programme for learning Arabic language and culture. It is located in Ngom, Mafa Local Government Area of Borno State.

3. Chinese Language Institute, University of Lagos: The Chinese Language Institute at the University of Lagos offers a language immersion programme for learning Mandarin Chinese.
4. German Language Village, Goethe-Institut Lagos: The Goethe-Institut Lagos offers a language immersion programme for learning German language and culture.
5. Japanese Language Village, Lagos State University: The Japanese Language Village is an immersion programme for learning Japanese language and culture. It is located in the Department of Foreign Languages, Lagos State University.
6. The University of Lagos partnered with the Beijing Institute of Technology to establish the Confucius Institute in Nigeria. Its primary objective is to spread Chinese culture and language throughout the country. The Confucius Institute at the University of Lagos achieves this by creating Chinese language curriculums, educating teachers, administering the HSK Examination, organizing cultural and artistic events, and offering insights into modern-day China.

These programmes offer learners a unique opportunity to immerse themselves in the language and culture of the target country, which is widely considered to be an effective way to improve language proficiency in Nigeria.

Benefits of Cultural Immersion Programmes to Language Learning

One of the main benefits of cultural immersion experiences is that they provide learners with the opportunity to interact with native speakers of the target language, thereby exposing them to firsthand experiences with the native speakers. This method helps to drive the target language and their cultures into the learner experientially, thereby making the learning experience a lasting and an enjoyable one. This can help learners improve their language proficiency, as well as their pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary (Kramsch, 2018). In Nigeria, where many learners may not have access to native speakers of Nigerian indigenous languages or native speakers of foreign or international languages, cultural immersion experiences can be particularly very beneficial in teaching the target language as well its culture to the learners. By interacting with native speakers, learners can gain a better understanding of the language's nuances and subtleties, which can help them communicate more effectively.

Cultural immersion experiences can also help learners to develop a deeper understanding and appreciation of the target language's culture. This can promote cultural understanding and diversity, which is particularly important in a country as linguistically and culturally diverse as Nigeria. According to Obidike and Nwadike (2015), cultural immersion experiences can promote intercultural communication and understanding, which can help to break down language barriers and foster greater social cohesion and tolerance between the users of the language and the learners.

Furthermore, cultural immersion experiences can enhance learners' motivation and interest in language learning. By exposing learners to the target language and culture in real-life situations, rather than just in the classroom, cultural immersion experiences can help learners see the practical benefits of language learning. According to Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011), motivation is a key factor in language learning success, and cultural immersion experiences can help to enhance learners' motivation and engagement with the language.

In addition to enhancing language learning outcomes, cultural immersion experiences can also have broader benefits for learners. For example, they can help learners develop important interpersonal and intercultural communication skills, which are increasingly important in today's globalized world (Feng & Byram, 2015). Cultural immersion experiences can also help to develop learners' critical thinking skills and their ability to adapt to new and unfamiliar situations (Hendrickson, 2013).

Challenges of Cultural Immersion implementation in Nigeria

However, as lofty and relevant as the benefits of cultural immersion is, to language learning in Nigeria, it is not without challenges bedeviling it. Therefore, this aspect explores the noticeable challenges affecting its implementation in Nigeria, according to scholars, reports and observations.

According to a report by the World Bank, Nigeria's education sector has suffered from underfunding, resulting in poor infrastructure, inadequate teacher training, and low quality of education (World Bank, 2020). Therefore, limited resources pose a significant obstacle to the implementation of cultural immersion programmes in Nigerian schools.

Another challenge is the lack of trained language teachers. In many Nigerian schools, language teachers may not have the necessary training and expertise to facilitate cultural immersion programmes. This lack of expertise makes it challenging to create effective cultural immersion programmes that align with best practices in language learning. A study conducted by the International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature found that many language teachers in Nigeria have inadequate training and lack knowledge in communicative language teaching (CLT)

methodology, which is essential for effective language immersion programmes (Osikoya & Akinyemi, 2021). Thus, the lack of trained language teachers is a significant barrier to the implementation of cultural immersion programmes in Nigerian schools.

Moreover, cultural diversity poses a challenge to cultural immersion programmes in Nigerian schools. Nigeria is a diverse country with over 250 ethnic groups, each with its language, traditions, and cultural practices (Nigeria Immigration Service, 2021). Therefore, it may be challenging to develop a cultural immersion programme that caters for the unique needs of each ethnic group. Additionally, cultural differences may lead to misunderstandings and conflicts, which may hinder effective cultural immersion programmes. According to a study conducted by Adeleke and Adeleke (2018), cultural diversity poses a significant challenge to the implementation of multicultural education in Nigeria, which is similar to cultural immersion programmes. Thus, cultural diversity is a significant barrier to the implementation of cultural immersion programmes in Nigerian schools.

Furthermore, the lack of government support and policy framework is a significant obstacle to the implementation of cultural immersion programmes in Nigerian schools. Although the Nigerian government recognizes the importance of language education, there is a lack of policies and frameworks to support the implementation of cultural immersion programmes. According to a report by the British Council, the Nigerian government needs to develop policies that support the development of language immersion programmes, provide funding, and training for language teachers, and ensure the integration of language and culture in the education system (British Council, 2015). Therefore, the lack of government support and policy framework is a significant barrier to the implementation of cultural immersion programmes in Nigerian schools.

Another significant challenge is the lack of parental involvement. Parents play a crucial role in supporting and promoting language learning and cultural immersion programmes. However, in many Nigerian schools, parents may not have the necessary knowledge or interest in supporting their children's language learning and cultural immersion activities. A study by Onyishi and Ogbu (2017) found that parental involvement in language learning in Nigeria is low, and parents may not have adequate information about the benefits of language learning and cultural immersion programmes. Thus, the lack of parental involvement is a significant obstacle to the implementation of cultural immersion programmes in Nigerian schools.

Moreover, cultural attitudes towards language learning pose a challenge to the implementation of cultural immersion programmes in Nigerian schools. In some Nigerian cultures, proficiency in local languages may be more highly valued than proficiency in foreign languages. Therefore, there may be a lack of interest in learning foreign languages and participating in cultural immersion programmes. Additionally, some cultural beliefs may discourage the use of foreign languages or exposure to foreign cultures. According to a study by Adeleke (2015), cultural attitudes towards language learning in Nigeria may be shaped by factors such as language policies, national identity, and socio-economic status. Therefore, cultural attitudes towards language learning are a significant barrier to the implementation of cultural immersion programmes in Nigerian schools.

Furthermore, the lack of access to technology and internet connectivity is a significant challenge to the implementation of cultural immersion programmes in Nigerian schools. Technology has become an essential tool in language learning and cultural immersion programmes. However, in many Nigerian schools, access to computers and the internet may be limited. This lack of access to technology and internet connectivity may hinder the development and implementation of effective cultural immersion programmes. According to a report by the International Association of Computer Science and Information Technology, Nigeria has a low level of internet penetration and inadequate ICT infrastructure, which poses a significant obstacle to the implementation of e-learning programmes (IACSIT, 2013). Therefore, the lack of access to technology and internet connectivity is a significant barrier to the implementation of cultural immersion programmes in Nigerian schools.

In conclusion, cultural immersion programmes have several benefits in language learning. However, the implementation of cultural immersion programmes in Nigerian schools is hindered by several challenges, including limited resources, the lack of trained language teachers, cultural diversity, the lack of government support and policy framework, the lack of parental involvement, cultural attitudes towards language learning, and the lack of access to technology and internet connectivity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, cultural immersion programmes have significant potential in enhancing language learning among students in Nigeria. However, implementing such programmes requires a well-defined methodology that addresses the prospects and challenges of cultural immersion in Nigerian schools. The prospects of cultural immersion programmes include promoting intercultural understanding, enhancing language proficiency, and improving students' attitudes towards learning. Cultural immersion activities such as field trips, guest speakers, cultural events, and language learning

materials are effective in promoting language learning and intercultural understanding.

On the other hand, challenges such as limited resources, lack of teacher training, and resistance to change, hinder the implementation of cultural immersion programmes in Nigerian schools. These challenges must be addressed to ensure successful implementation and sustainability of cultural immersion programmes.

Therefore, a well-defined framework is necessary for enhancing language learning through cultural immersion in Nigerian schools. This should involve needs analysis, programme development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and reflection and improvement. It should be flexible enough to allow for adjustments based on feedback from stakeholders. In conclusion, enhancing language learning through cultural immersion programmes in Nigerian schools requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders. By addressing the prospects and challenges and developing a well-defined methodology, Nigerian schools can effectively promote language learning and intercultural understanding among students.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of scholars and observations, the following recommendations are made;

One of the primary recommendations is for Nigerian schools to prioritize language education and provide resources for the development and implementation of cultural immersion programmes. This includes funding for language learning materials, cultural events, and teacher training programmes. The government should also develop policies and frameworks to support the implementation of cultural immersion programmes in schools. For example, the government can provide incentives for schools that prioritize language education and cultural immersion activities.

Another recommendation is to involve parents in language learning and cultural immersion activities. This can be achieved through parent-teacher associations, workshops, and cultural events. By involving parents in language learning, schools can help to create a supportive learning environment for students and promote the importance of language learning and cultural immersion activities.

Furthermore, it is essential to develop strategies to overcome cultural barriers to language learning. This includes promoting cultural awareness and sensitivity among students and teachers. Teachers should receive training on how to teach and interact with students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Additionally, schools can organize cultural exchange programmes to expose students to different cultures and promote intercultural understanding.

Another recommendation is to use technology to support language learning and cultural immersion programmes. Technology can be used to provide access to language learning materials, organize virtual cultural events, and connect students with native speakers of the target language. This can help to overcome the lack of access to technology and internet connectivity in some Nigerian schools.

Finally, it is essential to promote the importance of language learning and cultural immersion programmes in Nigerian society. This can be achieved through public awareness campaigns, media outreach, and community events. By promoting the importance of language learning and cultural immersion programmes, schools can create a supportive learning environment that values language learning and cultural diversity.

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