



The Relevance of French Language Learning to National Development in Nigeria

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Abstract. Language is an integral part of a society and its role in national development cannot be undermined. Since its acceptance as the second official language by Nigerian government, French language has not been given immense attention like English language. This has affected its acquisition and its function as the country's second official language. Its low acquisition has also affected the country's bilateral relationship not only with France but also with other francophone countries especially in Africa hence preventing some aspects of socio-economic development. This article examines the relevance of French language learning to national development in Nigeria. It adopts an explorative approach to depict the importance of French language acquisition and Its role in national development. It anchors its analysis on the Nigerian education system to expose why the teaching of French language must be accorded immense importance. The article revealed that Nigeria has the great potential of achieving its development policy if French language becomes as functional as English language. It also recommends among others that the learning of French language should be encouraged and supported in schools for easy acquisition by learners.

Keywords: Development Education, French, Language, Nigeria, Schools

1. Introduction

Development is a term used to refer to any nation that is making the effort of putting all possible mechanism into function for growth in every sector of its economy to improvement lives. It is a collective effort put together by everybody in the society. Most developed countries in the world today do not rely only on technology for their achievements hence language played a vital role in

their development processes. Developing countries such as Nigeria that aspires to achieve full development must also consider the relevance of language in its quest. Language gives room for proper interaction and communication in a functional society. It is a system of communication in both speech and writing it is also a functional mechanism that determines the growth and progress of a given society. It is understood and appreciated if the structure can be understood and interpreted by both the listener and the speaker (Katzner, 2015). French as a foreign language also has the potential of contributing positively to national development in Nigeria. It was introduced to Africa by the colonial administration and has its origin linked to France. Nigeria's location among francophone countries makes the learning of French very important. Therefore, to foster part of its development processes, there must be a need to interact with her francophone neighbours for linguistic co-operation and bilateral relations. Since its introduction as a second official language in Nigeria on December 14, 1996 by the late General Sani Abacha, it has continued to propel good bilateral relationship between Nigeria, France and majority of the francophone countries in Africa and other parts of the world. French language was introduced to Africa by the French government during the colonial era and since its introduction it has been given enormous regard because it is the official language of majority of francophone countries but in Nigeria, French is the second official language while English is first (FME 2004). The relevance of French in the progress and development of Nigeria cannot be overemphasized.

2. Franco-Nigerian Linguistic Co-operation and its Importance to Nigerians

Undoubtedly, Nigeria is the largest economy in Africa and the need French language acquisition by Nigerians for interaction cannot be overemphasized. This is because the world itself is now a global village and information of daily events around the world today is at our finger tips. Lack of the understanding of major world Languages such as English, French, German, Spanish and Arabic could lead to a breach of information that will result to a decrease in bilateral relationships of countries. Onyemelukwe (2004) affirmed that: “foreign investors including those from France were attracted by the oil boom and reconsider their stay to Nigeria. The investors were also interested in merchandise trade, services, transport, communications, general commerce and government contract”. This implies that these investors are lured to Nigeria by the prospective economy emanating from oil boom.

The need to understand French language is directed toward securing and protecting our national heritage from foreign investors who could sometimes be fraudulent and corrupt. From all indication, it is very important that leaning French language by Nigerians would help in boosting the economy of Nigeria. This would also help in improving Franco-Nigerian linguistic co-operation. Due to their interest in Nigeria, the French government has left no stone unturned in helping Nigerians to learn French. The French government has introduced French language learning centers such as Alliance Française, French cultural centers and has also awarded lots of scholarships to Nigerians to study in France. One would ask at this point, what could be the relevance of French to Nigerians? Onyemelukwe (2004) gave three major reasons to answer this question:

- to promote cordial relationship and healthy communication with her francophone neighbors.
- to promote trade and commerce, political, economic and diplomatic relations among the international community.
- and to enjoy the benefit of bilingualism, French will be added to the Nigerian’s repertoire of languages (Nigerian languages, English, Arabic, etc. and French for regional and global integration.

Obviously, Nigerian government stands a better chance of achieving greatly if French can be as functional as English and some of its indigenous languages such as Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. Nigerians would also have added advantage over their contemporaries in neighboring countries around the coastal region. But the question of how this can be achieved is still rhetorical and French

language learners are often faced with problems such as poor language environment for acculturation, incompetent teachers, insufficient instructional materials and a conducive learning environment where language laboratories can be used. The effect on these hitches on learners is the wrong internalization of French language structure resulting to excessive grammatical and linguistic errors during communication.

Today, French as a foreign language is considered very important in Nigerian school curriculums. It is taught in primary and secondary schools including the tertiary institutions all over Nigeria. French is however taught as a compulsory subject in primary schools and as an elective in secondary schools but in the tertiary level it is a course of choice that can be studied in a period of 3 to 4 years after which a degree would be awarded. To facilitate the learning of French, it is clear however that the Nigerian government has put in place programmes that promote the study of French language in its primary, secondary and tertiary schools. (Bamgbose and Akere, 2019). Some states such as Kaduna state and River state of Nigeria have Organized French training programmes by the ministry of education in partnership with Alliance Française. In River state for instance, through a public arrangement, the state government donated a piece of land for the development of French language resource center (Adenipekun, 2019). This is considered as a move in the developmental process.

3. National effort towards establishing French Language

Since the introduction of French language in Nigeria in 1996, the learning of French language in tertiary institutions has continued to be a discipline of interest to academics. Scholars in different professional disciplines see it necessary to have the knowledge of French language which they consider as added advantage to their academic profile. Undoubtedly, French has become a discipline of interest for both national and academic development. According to the Nigerian National Policy on Education (NPE, 2004), the purpose of introducing French as a foreign language to Nigerian schools is:

For smooth interaction with our neighbours, it is desirable for every Nigerian to speak French. Accordingly, French shall be the second official language in Nigeria and it shall be compulsory in primary and junior secondary school but non-vocational elective in senior secondary school.

The policy on language was obviously introduced into the school curriculum to give Nigerians better opportunities over their francophone counterparts. Since Nigeria is surrounded by French speaking

countries, her citizens should be able to communicate in French to enable them interact with their francophone neighbours. While English is classified as the language of science, French is known as the language of diplomacy, therefore the need for Nigerians to understand French is very important to fit into globalization. However, the process that drives globalization into perfect function is based on a combination of economic, technological, sociocultural, linguistic and political forces. According to Saskia (2016):

a good part of globalization consists of an enormous variety of micro-processes that begin to denationalize what had been constructed as national-whether policies, capital, political subjectivity, urban spaces, temporal frames, or any other of a variety of dynamics and domains.

In considering the National policy on Education (NPE, 2004) on the aspect of interaction with neighbors who principally from francophone countries, shows that French is not really at disadvantage in Africa. Rwanda for example switched to English and Madagascar added English as one of the official languages. Cameroon is known to be a bilingual country with French and English but despite that, we notice that French is given priority over English. Anglophone Cameroonians speak French but not the other way round.

4. The Place of French Language in Nigeria's Education System

Nigeria is not the only Anglophone country that has introduced French in her school curriculum. French is also recognized and taught in schools in countries such as Ghana, Kenya and Liberia. In primary schools in Ghana, 13% of Ghanaians speak French fluently and the country is an associate member of francophonie. Recently the government of Ghana required its government officials and military personnel to be fluent in French language (Allwright & Hanks, 2019). French is taught as an elective subject in secondary school, both junior and senior, but teaching French is associated with numerous challenges which Nigerian government should be aware of to enable the achievement of her language policy. The challenge that comes with teaching of French is an impediment on learners who will not find models to interact with the language on daily basis like the languages of the immediate environment. It is in this regard that the French language village Badagry was established to encourage learners of French to undergo immersion courses for a period of six months to one year but beside this, French preliminary programmes were also introduced in some universities such as the Kastina State University, Kaduna State University, University of Lagos, Ahmadu Bello University Zaria etc. This programme is aimed at teaching the

rudiments of French language to prepare students for degree course in the faculty. However, since its introduction in 1998 in Ahmadu Bello University and in the above-mentioned universities, student's performance has remarkably improved. This is due to the level of interest and enthusiasm on the part of the students who are eager to know French. Efforts have been made to tackle the frequent linguistic and grammatical problems students face and this include, the wrong conjugation of the three types of verbs, the misuse of prepositions and possessive adjectives in their singular and plural form and lastly, the misuse of French articles which remains a fundamental problem faced by French students in most schools in Nigeria. It is obvious that the only way to encouraging the learners of French not to lose interest in the process of learning is to carry out research that would bring solution to their grammatical and linguistic problems.

5. The Importance of Teaching French in Nigeria

French is among the world's major language which is in constant competition with English as a language of international organization and diplomacy. Katzner (2015), records that French is the mother tongue of about 75million people, with millions more familiar with it in some degrees as a second language. The adoption of French as the nation's second official language is of utmost importance because language propels the economy of a bilingual nation towards development. According to Moruwawon (2014), the republic of Cameroon was made up of two former colonies; French and English speaking. The republic consists of eastern Cameroon who was predominantly French while the western Cameroon was English speaking. At present, French and English are today being used as official languages but French remains the dominant language (Fisayo, 2015).

The real need for French in Nigeria according to Nkom (2008) is to improve Nigeria's geographically, economically, diplomatically as well as her educational research and this makes it imperative for her to give adequate attention to the teaching and learning of French language. The first attempt at the Franco-Nigerian co-operation started from the teaching of French in Nigerian secondary schools. For many years, the efforts to establish conducive learning environment for teaching French by French government and its support for the "year abroad" training of French language students remained the hallmark of Franco-Nigerian co-operation.

According to Ojo (2017), French would better prepare the Nigerian child who is planning to move into the future with self-assurance, hope and sense

of belonging. He will discover that even in the Nigeria of tomorrow, French will serve as a linguistic visa that would open better professional prospects for him. Like with the teaching of most foreign languages, teaching French in Nigerian secondary schools and tertiary institutions is not problem-free. Some of these problems are highlighted by Nkom (2008), who complains that there are lack of qualified teachers and teaching materials for effective teaching of the language. Nkom recommends the teaching of only the oral aspect of French. Ellis (2018), states that for French to succeed in Nigeria, French must be taught as a language of culture. It is therefore of great importance for parents and guardians to allow their children and wards to learn the language as it would open wider doors of opportunities to them. Therefore, it requires all of us to speak more than one language. If we can speak an international language like French, definitely we will have certain immeasurable concessions. It will expose us to several meetings and seminars outside the shores of this country (Ellis, 2018). The experience acquired abroad by scholars, political elites and technocrats would be an eye opener for development in Nigeria.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, it is obvious that French language learning demands a lot of efforts and courage. This article revealed that Nigeria can attain full development with French as a language of communication. For business transaction with her neighbors and other forms of co-operation, Nigeria needs French language to achieve her objective in the development processes. Understanding French would create an enabling environment for interactions and business transactions hence liberating the country from language barrier and restriction.

French language should be given priority attention in all levels of education in fulfillment of the recent national policy on Education. This should start from the primary schools and secondary schools so that within a short time we can achieve our goal of nation building. Graduates of Polytechnics, Colleges Education and Universities should be made to undergo language training programme at French language centres and Alliance Française to increase French literacy in the country. French language should be made compulsory in all secondary schools in this country from JSS1-SS2 and at first year of all tertiary institutions.

The Federal Government of Nigeria should give scholarship to those who intend to study French at

the tertiary institution. This should include a trip to France for the “year abroad” programme to increase enrolment, interest, encourage participation and commitment. More French teachers should be trained and employed with high remunerations and incentives. This will lure more French graduates who are either self-employed or working in companies into the teaching profession. This should be done in conjunction with the French governments to enhance and promote the Franco-Nigerian co-operation.

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