The Imperative of French Language Education in Nigeria

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Abstract

In Nigeria, language education has been considered as the basic tool for national integration towards productivity and development. Unfortunately, French language/learning in Nigeria has witnessed myriads of problems. This paper sets out to make a case for French language education in Nigeria. The paper posits that although the Nigeria policy of education recognizes French language as the second official language of the nation, it is only on paper and yet to be implemented in the real sense of it. Using the literary review methodology, this paper briefly defines language education as well as presents a brief history of French language in Nigeria. The Authors discuss the status prospects of French language in Nigeria. Furthermore, the paper throws a light on the peculiarities and the challenges of French language study in the tertiary institutions. The paper concludes by making some recommendations.

Keywords: *Case, French Language, Language Education*

Introduction

Education is defined as the "development of an improvement in learning (knowledge and skills) to bring out or develop potential (Eidikeln, 2018), again, in the Oxford dictionary: (2023), "education is defined as a process of teaching, training and learning, especially in schools, colleges or Universities to improve knowledge and develop skills". From the above definitions, one can say that "language education is the process and practice of teaching a second or foreign language…": Wikipedia. In a simple term, language education means the teaching, and learning of any language in schools. Therefore, French language education is the formal acquisition of communicative skills in French language. The aim of French language education is to "equip learners with the ability to read and write (French) with understanding, communicate effectively and to use (French) language with ease in different situations": Sitter kerala. French language draws a lot of attention in Nigeria due to the country's heterogeneous nature and geographical location. These features make the teaching and learning of foreign languages like English & French language possible alongside their local counterparts: Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba etc.

This paper focuses on French language study in Nigeria. The paper believes that "although the Nigeria policy of education recognizes French as the second official language, and the Nigerian passport among other documents does the same, French has not, in reality, attained the status of official language in Nigeria as the majority of the people are not able to communicate in French language. The Paper sets out to make a case for French language. There is a growing concern about the attitude of Nigerians towards the study of French language in our schools. A good number of the people are not sufficiently informed about the importance of French language in our educational system. Authors disagree with those who think that studying French language in our tertiary institutions is a waste of time and that French language is a course for slow learners, hence most people develop cold feet towards studying French language. French language has faced many problems so far, like neglect, poor funding and facilities, inadequate teachers and teaching materials etc. The paper examines the concept of French language education. How relevant is the study of French language teaching and learning

in Nigeria to the economic development of the nation? What are the benefits of French language to the individuals who acquire the skill? This paper attempts to answer these questions and more. The paper makes it clear that not just the people, but Nigeria as a nation needs another international language like French to function effectively.

Review of Related Literature

French language descended from Latin, just like other romance languages. It first appeared in 842 AD, when it was used in the Strasbourg Oath and appeared in religious writings in the10th & 11th centuries. However, French literature did not take off until the late 12th Century. An attempt on the teaching and learning of French in Nigeria dated as far back as 19thcentury. By 1878, the Wesley High School already included French in its curriculum. At tertiary level, the situation was not much different. The teaching and learning of French language at the University level became necessary as those few lucky Nigerians who were products of the school mentioned above were in quest for their university education. Consequently, around 1960, some Universities like, University of Ibadan, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, University of Lagos, University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) and Ahmadu Bello University Zaria took up the challenge of teaching and learning of French language with expatriate lecturers like Herin G.J, Evans Wilfred Fueser, Bram C.M.B. among others. According to Asobele (1999), "The French language came to Nigeria before the 19th Century through the transmissions and borrowed words in commerce, religion and cultural contacts with the European merchants and colonial masters. French was introduced into the Nigerian curriculum in 1956". Officially, French has been the second official language of Nigeria since 1996. For the teaching and learning of any language to be carried out successfully, its status needs to be clearly defined in the educational policy.

The declaration of French as second official language of Nigeria during late General Sani Abacha's regime in 1996 paved the way for the recognition of French language education in Nigeria. Hence, in the National Policy on Education (NPE), (2004), the status of French language was officially stated and documented as follows:
For smooth interaction with our neighbors, 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 Schools, but non-vocational elective at the Senior Secondary School". The good intention of the Nigerian government, as reflected in the declaration quoted, is highly commendable. Unfortunately, after so many years, the vision of making at least 70% of Nigerians internationally bilingual in French language has not fully materialized. Despite the fact that Nigeria government wants French language to be offered as a core subject in both Primary and Junior Secondary Levels of our educational system, many public schools still remain adamant on the full implementation of the said policy.

The question one needs to ask at this stage is: what is the reason for the failure in the implementation of the said policy? Who is responsible for the failure, the government or the policy makers? This paper opines that the status of French language as highlighted in the National Policy on Education (NPE) is nothing but a mere paper work. This assertion explains the reason why French language is not only optional at Senior Secondary Schools, but also a non-vocational elective. Again, the status of French language in Nigerian schools is unstable as many Nigerians are still in the state of confusion as to whether French should be treated as a second official language or as a foreign language. According to this paper, such state of dilemma is seriously and adversely affecting French language from taking its rightful position in the educational system of Nigeria. The paper opines that if French is fully recognized as the second official language of the nation, the entire Nigerian populace would definitely give it the needed support to succeed as they have done to English language.

Instead, Nigerians up till now label French a 'foreign language' thereby seeing it as a strange subject that is not needed to be offered in schools.

Prospects of French Language Education in Nigeria

Nigeria as a nation has every cause to take French language education more seriously like never before. The trend of globalization is the number one reason why Nigerians should strive to embrace the teaching and learning of French as the officially recognized nation's second official language. Interactions are becoming inevitable among people, nations and organizations of the world which calls for more than one foreign or international language. The use of common language remains a strong key in areas like trade, tourism, international relations between governments, technology, science and Media. As language of international society that is only rivaled by English, French will surely serve as a linguistic visa in disciplines like Banking, Pharmacy, Secretaryship, Medicine etc. According to Ashabua (2019): "French as Nigeria Second official language has suffered several setbacks in a bid to take its rightful place as stipulated in the National Policy on Education".

The importance of the French language as a tool for meeting transformation agenda in Nigeria cannot be over emphasized. According to Ajiboye, (2002), French language and the contemporary Nigerian society are inseparable as the modern world sees it as one of the languages upon which civilization depends. This assertion is crucial because it seems the right place to bring to fore the radiance of French language and why it is preferred to other world languages in this century as an instrument for national development. French is a language of precision; it was the language of European aristocracy and world diplomacy. Ajiboye, (2002) argued that speaking French in the 18th and 19th century was considered a symbol of intellectual soundness, lucidity, nobility of mind, grace and culture. The paper agrees that the prestigious nature of the French language is no doubt evident in today's world; the importance of French language cannot but be neglected only at the peril of any such country. Akintayo, (2009), observed that most literary, scientific and technological developments in Europe were traced to France.

Many French philosophers and scientists constitute important land mark in the history of human development. To be specific, the contributions of Ambrose Pare were very remarkable in the areas of medicine. Philosophers like Descartes was known as initiator of modern scientific thought. Pascal, a philosopher, mathematician and doctor invented integral calculation and probability in mathematics. Furthermore, French is the language of culture that unlocks the doors of arts, music, fashion, cuisine, etc. French is also the language of many great literary masterpieces. Ajiboye, (1989), observed that African continent is the host of largest French colonies in the world. He asserted that French language has been playing a crucial role in the economic lives of most of the African countries, of which Nigeria is one.

Battye and Hintze, (1997), posited "that out of 171 independent countries and 14 colonies in the world, about 60% of them speak and use French". Also, Adeojo, (1996) stated that "French language does not belong to France alone; it is a world language, spoken in countries around the world in Africa, Asia, America, Europe and the Middle East. French language is the language with the 2nd largest number of speakers in the European Union". This is important because the decisions of the EU directly or indirectly affect the developing countries including Nigeria. French language is used in many international organizations. French is very crucial for employment in the United Nations and it serves as indispensable medium of communication for official transaction within the organization.

The Importance of French Language Education in Tertiary Institutions

The importance of French language education has regional and global implications on all major economies of the world. Learning any language is an ongoing process and no one expect results without any effort. Many resources are readily available to lessen the effort and time it takes to learn French. Assuredly, over 40 to 50% of English vocabulary comes from the French Language. In fact, French language has the most words spread out over many different languages. Learning French language can even help people to understand their own language better. All languages change over time and French is no exception. To understand the importance of French language, you need to learn the language yourself so that you can receive the full benefits of this amazing language. In fact, latest research has shown that learning a second language helps fight against Alzheimer's Disease and slows down the aging effects of the brain.

Here are the major reasons why we study French language in higher institution:

- **A world class language:**

According to the 2022 report of the Organization international de la francophonie (OIF), **"**321 million people speak French" on the five continents. The Francophonie, the international organization of French-speaking countries comprises of 68 states and governments. French is the second most widely learned foreign language after English, and the ninth most widely spoken language in the world. French is also the only language, alongside English, that is taught in every country in the world. France operates the biggest international network of cultural institutes, which run French-language courses for more than 750,000 learners. "French language is one of the most influential languages because of its wide use in the world of journalism, jurisprudent, education and diplomacy": Wikipedia.

- **A language for the job market**

Speaking "French language is an advantage on the international job market. A knowledge of French opens the doors of French companies in France and other French-speaking parts of the world (Canada, Switzerland, Belgium, and North and Sub-Saharan Africa)". As the world's fifth biggest economy and number three destination for foreign investment, France is a major economic partner; (n.d), Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs**.**

- **The language of culture:**

According to ministry for Europe and foreign affairs, "French is the international language of cooking, fashion, theatre, the visual arts, dance and architecture. A knowledge of French offers access to great works of literature, as well as films and songs in the original French. French is the language of Victor Hugo, Moliere, Leopold Sendar Senghor, Edith Piaf. Jean-Paul Sartre, Alain Delon and Zinedine Zidane". Studying French increases your knowledge of other people and their cultures.

- **A language for travel:**

France is the number-one tourist destination that attracts more than 80 million tourists a year. A little French makes it so much more enjoyable to visit Paris and all the regions of France. French language also comes in handy when travelling to Africa, Europe, Switzerland, Canada, Monaco, the Seychelles and other places.

- **A language for higher education:**

French language opens up study opportunities at renowned French Universities and business schools, ranked among the top higher education institutions in Europe and all over the world. Students with a good level of French are eligible for French government scholarships to enroll in postgraduate courses in France in any discipline and qualify for internationally recognized French degrees**.**

- **The language of international relations:**

According to Ministry of Europe Foreign Affairs, (n.d): "French is both a working language and an official language of the United Nations, the European Union, UNESCO, NATO, the

International Olympic Committee, the International Red Cross and International Courts. French is the language of the three cities where the EU institutions are headquartered: Strasbourg, Brussels and Luxembourg".

- **A language that opens up the world:**

Apart from English and German, French is the third most used language on the Internet. An ability to understand French offers an opportunity to view the world differently; via communication with French speakers from all the continents and news from the leading French-language international media (TV5, France 24 and Radio France International).

- **A language that is fun to learn:**

French is fun and easy language to learn. There are many methods and modern techniques of learning French. With the new technologies all over the internet, learning French has become easy, enjoyable and affordable. At any level, you will find the method that suits you well.

- **A language for learning other languages:**

French is a good base for learning other languages, especially Romance languages like Spanish, Italian, Portuguese and Romanian as well as English, since about fifty percent of current English vocabulary is derived from French language.

- **The language of love and reason:**

Learning French is also a way of learning a beautiful, rich, melodious language, usually known as the language of love. "According to France Diplomacy, French is also an analytical language that Structures thought and develops critical thinking, which is a valuable skill for discussions and negotiations".

Critical Challenges

- **Policy Deficiency:** The sub-section of the policy on education that provides for French language as a non-vocational elective at secondary school lacks the necessary impetus needed to facilitate the learner's performance. This sudden cutoff affects the French language learning.
    - **Problem of Teachers:** The quality of teachers that teach the language is another factor that militates against French productivity. Some of the teachers lack the necessary teaching qualification and few of them who are trained with NCE, B.ED or BA.ED lack communicative competence in the language.
    - **Attitudinal Problems:** The attitude of some Nigerians, especially parents towards the language as another western imposition capable of creating linguistic confusion. Some people think that it does not lead to wider scope of career except the teaching profession. The attitude of the policy makers towards the implementation of its policy is equally discouraging.
    - **Poor Funding:** Most of the institutions where the language is taught are underfunded. As a result, the necessary materials and facilities for teaching the language are not available. The laboratories are under equipped. There is no access to internet services and uninterrupted power supply to watch and listen to French programs.
    - **Curriculum Problem:** The course combination being offered in some tertiary institutions creates divided attention in the learner and can degenerate into confusion of purpose. Furthermore, the current situation in the degree program where emphasis is laid on literature and civilization does not equip learners with the skill to function effectively in the language.

Call to Action

French language has been given a theoretical recognition in the national language policy, which does not translate to practical reality because it continues to suffer especially in

the senior secondary schools. There is therefore need for practical action devoid of all political and religious considerations because French is a language and should not be subjected to unnecessary scrutiny. The French language is highly extremely important for all round development in Nigeria. Therefore, it is imperative for the government to facilitate its development for a progressive productivity. To ensure functional French that will enhance self-employment and productivity in Nigeria, the paper recommends the following measures:

- French language should be made compulsory up to senior secondary school level in order to sustain and perfect its learning progress.
- French language should feature at least 3 times a week in the school time-table as time input determines the output.
- French language curriculum in the tertiary institutions should be redirected and emphasis should be laid on productive, technical and vocational French in order to make it relevant for employment in all sectors of the economy.
- There should be proper education and re-orientation of Nigerians on the need to encourage the learning of French language at all levels and across disciplines.
- Government should equip the French language laboratories with modern learning aids such as internet facilities, computers, audio- visual materials, etc.
- Seasonal training and retraining of French teachers should be given a priority because not only is there lack of teachers but the quality leaves much to be desired. The Nigerian government should invest part of the money they spent on sponsoring pilgrimages to sponsor courses and programmes for the French learners because it is a worthwhile venture.
- Teachers should be aware of new methodologies and keep abreast with modern technologies.

Conclusion

The paper posits that Nigeria, as a nation needs another international language like French language to function effectively in the international economy of the 21st Century. There is need therefore, for national Commitment to French language education. The time of ignorance has passed. All Nigerians should be ready to be French complaint if they want to remain relevant in this fast-changing world.

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