

**FOREIGN LANGUAGE AND NATIONAL
DEVELOPMENT:
THE CASE OF FRENCH IN NIGERIA**

SANNI-SULEIMAN A.

Department of French, University of Ilorin, Ilorin
Afusat@unilorin.edu.ng

Abstract:

National development involves all the activities of the government geared towards improving the socio economic, political, cultural and educational life, etc. of its citizens. Education is seen as the bedrock of any nation that wants to develop and the importance of language in education cannot be over emphasized. This paper highlights the contribution of the French Language to national development and the need for developing it in the nation.

Introduction

The teaching of French in Nigeria can be traced back to the colonial era, when the subject was mainly taught in the Roman Catholic Schools. This is because French was first introduced to the country by the missionaries. However, not all Roman Catholic schools were teaching the language because, at that time, much consideration was still given to Latin language which was said to be closely related to English.

The teaching of French started gaining more ground in Nigerian schools after independence, when Nigerians suddenly realized that they were surrounded by Francophone countries and therefore saw the need to communicate with their neighbours since they did not want to live in isolation. This urge for communication was also felt by the Francophone countries in Africa, who, like their Anglophone counterparts, introduced the teaching of English in their schools. And today, in many Francophone countries, English is a compulsory subject in schools. The inclusion of a foreign language in the syllabus is an obvious way of reducing language barriers between people sharing the same borders. With this awareness, the intellectuals from English and French-speaking countries were able to meet more frequently to discuss their problems. More so, times are changing as the world is gradually becoming into a "global village". In Africa,

the French-speaking countries seem to attach greater importance to foreign language teaching than the English-speaking countries who think that a foreign language is unnecessary where an increasing number of people understand English. In Togo, Benin Republic, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, etc., foreign languages are learnt up to the advanced level in secondary school irrespective of the area of specialization of the students. That is why our counterparts from non-English countries come here and address us very often in English.

Nigerian Universities and Colleges of Education have ever since their inception been faced with the problem of who to recruit to study French. This is because very few students offer French in the secondary schools due to lack of French teachers and even where teachers are available; students are reluctant to learn the subject. This is attributable, in part to the fact that the National Policy on Education does not help in the learning of French in secondary schools. The subject is given an elective status. This, in no small measure contributes to why students shy away from the language which is already at a disadvantage, because it is not the language of the immediate environment. Apart from that, many people often query the teaching of a foreign language in our schools on the grounds that the time would be better spent on science and mathematics. The scarcity of French students in secondary schools therefore makes it difficult for the tertiary institutions to recruit candidates to the French Department. Very few students study French up to their senior secondary school level. As a result of that, JAMB has little or no French students to send to the tertiary institutions. The palliative measures used by some tertiary institutions to beef up admission into their French departments are to embark on preliminary/remedial courses in French.

Nigeria, like many other African countries, is a multi-lingual society. Up till now, researchers have not been able to give the actual number of indigenous languages we have in the country. Hansford (1976) puts it at 394, Adekunle (1976) and Brann (1978) claim that they are more than 400. With this higher number of indigenous languages, more than the average of the population may be regularly using more than one language because apart from his mother tongue, the Nigerian child also has to learn the official language of the country i.e. English plus any of the three main languages (Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa) in secondary school, as stipulated in the National Policy on Education. One can, therefore, see that the Nigerian child is already saddled with other

languages apart from his mother tongue. However, the fact still remains that he needs to add another language to it, i.e. French. The need for Nigerians to take the learning of French more seriously became imperative when one Nigerian Head of State, Late General Sani Abacha, realized the advantages of making Nigeria a bilingual state. There and then various committees and task force were set up to review the status of French language in the country. The committee on the future of Higher Education set up for the purpose of learning French language in Nigerian schools advocated for a National Policy on Education that will make every Nigerian "learn and speak French Language within the shortest space and time" (quoted by Nwanze (1997: 7)). The revised edition of the National Policy on Education (1998) also stipulates that French should be one of the core subjects in both junior and senior secondary schools.

Today, French is offered in many universities in Nigeria and there is even a suggestion to make it an integral part of the General Studies. What then do we stand to gain by learning a foreign language?

1. Rational for Learning A Foreign Language

Learning a foreign language is as good as learning any other subject taught in schools. This is because, one should believe that educational programmes are designed in such a way that they provide opportunities for an individual to realize his potential in life.

Broughton, et al (1980) agree that "the major areas of the school curriculum are the instruments by which the individual grows into more secure, more contributory, more total member of the society". If that is true, then each student should be given the opportunity to study a foreign language in school. Broughton et al go on to say that "by learning a foreign language we see our own in perspective, we recognize that there are other ways of saying things, other ways of thinking and so on". Rivers (1970), also states that through acting out the role of a foreigner, he (the student) may come to realize that difference does not necessarily mean inferiority or lack of moral principle".

One of the basic aims of foreign language learning lies in broadening the student's outlook and views in the sense that it allows him to see and analyze things beyond the scope of his environment. Therefore, he will be able to understand and appreciate other people's culture better.

The knowledge of a foreign language also develops in students the interest of adventure because they would like to meet and interact with the users of that language. As the world is gradually transformed into a "global village" many more people, either out of sheer interest, or one kind of necessity or another, or even out of compulsion, are starting to learn French. That is why, nowadays, one notices an accelerated evolution concerning international languages. More and more people want to learn French, English, Arabic, German or Russian, not because of the interest they have in literature or in the users of those languages, but to have access to the modern world of science, technology, art, culture and entertainment.

Modern world of technology seems to have developed a sense of exoticism on individuals. This could also have accounted for the need to learn a foreign language. Thus, some professionals, like doctors, tourist agents, businessmen, etc. may learn it for professional use while others may learn it for cultural reasons, that is, to be able to read newspapers or books, listen to the radio in foreign language or to travel abroad.

Nevertheless, it is the geographical position, international relation and cultural associations of the country that will determine the foreign language to be offered. As Nigeria is surrounded by Francophone countries, our choice of the French language is influenced by the constant interactions with the neighbouring countries. Therefore, the French language has an important role to play in our national development.

2. The Role of French in National Development

French is taught as a foreign language in some countries where English is either the native or the official language. Thus, it is not surprising to acknowledge its importance in a country like Nigeria where English is the official language. French and English languages have been co-existing for quite some time now in Nigeria. It is only that French was up till very recently seen as a non-functional language in the country. However, the pronouncement of a former Head of State, late General Sani Abacha to make French the second official language of the country gave the language a new face-lift and made many Nigerians to start having a second thought about the language. That proclamation, however, generated a lot of arguments. Some people saw it as a way of moving the country forward because it would enhance the nation's position

internationally. Others saw it as another way of colonizing Nigeria. Nwanze (1997: 7) reported the former Director of the French Language Village saying that "it is the most reasonable, the most pragmatic policy statement that has ever been made by any Nigerian head of state in terms of language policy and indeed a foreign language policy". Some also taught that it would have a negative effect on the development of our indigenous languages. What then does the nation stand to gain by making French another official language? In what way does it contribute to our national development? Elugbe (1990), defines national development as "the growth of a nation in terms of unity, education, economic well-being, main participation, etc.". The list cannot be exhausted, but the fact remains that national development covers a multiplicity of areas in each of which French language plays a vital role. There is no doubt that there is a lot to be gained from acquiring a second foreign language in Nigeria. Giving the prime importance of language to human civilization, the ability of our people to speak several languages will confer immense advantages on them, especially at international fora. With reference to acquisition of French, the advantages are glaring and self-evident.

2.1 Political Implications

The role of French language in Nigeria can be seen in the light of Nigeria's leadership role in Africa. Nigeria prides herself as the giant of Africa. Before apartheid came to its inevitable end in South Africa, every country in Africa practically looked up to Nigeria as the big brother. Even now, no talk of regional or sub-regional integration is completed on this continent without a word from Nigeria. So, if Nigeria must make any meaningful headway in her new foreign policy thrust of regional integration, she must seek to impose her presence first in the ECOWAS sub-region. It is important to note that out of the sixteen countries making up the community, only five are English-speaking and two speak Portuguese. Since French is the working language of the remaining nine countries, it becomes imperative that Nigeria takes the learning of French more seriously. She will be accorded a significant position among the Francophone countries and it will make her voice heard in the corridors of power in matters that require lobbying.

At present, it is believed that the learning of French language will strengthen and foster Nigeria's leadership in the sub-region. French, as an international language is used as a medium of communication between and among populations of distinct political entities. Moreover, the

understanding of any foreign language in interpersonal or intergovernmental relations generally reduces suspicions and hostility and it creates a conducive atmosphere for courting relationship. The need to lay a solid linguistic foundation in French is substantiated by the fact that like English, French has become indispensable in the day-to-day running of world affairs. In international organizations, selection for jobs has probably favoured candidates from French-speaking countries. This is because they speak and understand the two most spread international languages, English and French. It means that people who speak English and French stand a better chance of securing international appointments. The official languages of the United Nations are known to be English, French and Arabic. This means that whoever will emerge as secretary-general of the body must be proficient in English and French languages. This was said to have worked in favour of the two last occupants of that position, both of whom incidentally come from Africa. That was why Olusegun Obasanjo, before he became the president of the democratic Republic of Nigeria, attempted to learn the French language as he prepared to contest for the seat of the UN scribe. Therefore, we can say that French, if given adequate attention, will attract more international recognition to Nigerians and enhance the competitiveness of our professionals.

2.2 Economic Implications

The economic benefits of speaking French are numerous. Effective communication in various languages promotes good international trade; transactions are done faster and with greater ease. Currency conversion is better understood by all parties involved and there is enough confidence and trust on all sides. In addition, in spite of France's sentimental attachment to its former colonies in the West Africa sub-region, the fact remains that French investments in Nigeria are to all intent and purpose very substantial. In an era when the nation stands in need of foreign investments, the language obstacle, if removed, will not only ease business contact between Frenchmen and Nigerians, but it will also encourage French investment. Again, access to certain positions in multinational cooperation and international organizations will be improved. Nigerians do organize business transactions in the francophone countries of ECOWAS. Such opportunities could be expanded to different areas of trade, if the language barrier between both sides is removed. Even within the Nigeria context, inability to speak the other person's language

often generates mistrust and suspicion, particularly when it comes to business. We will therefore agree with Clark (1988: 15) when he says that "in foreign language learning, the emphasis is placed on the promotion of an ability to communicate and thus it establishes a better understanding and unity among groups and nations".

Language is a vehicle of communication and culture. The more the number of languages an individual speaks, the wider his access to global culture and his understanding of human affairs. When you speak a certain language, you acquire the key to the culture of the language. Ade-Ojo (1997:53) states that "Whoever speaks your language is seen as your brother or sister, he communicates with you and understands you better than the others". The study of French will promote understanding between us and our francophone neighbours. Ade-Ojo continues by saying that:

French language would favour the building of a socio-cultural and politico-economic bridge that would enable more and more Nigerians to move out of their geographical insularity to reach out better to their brothers and sisters belonging to the francophone linguistic family of Africa.

2.3 Education

Education is the bedrock of any development. It is also the engineer of development, and the controlling system of every national activity. Thus, it is the level of educational attainment of the people of a country which constitutes the most important criterion in any development plan. Education is the force that makes any country move in the right direction, be it economically, politically, socially or otherwise. From the foregoing, the teaching and learning of French cannot but be necessary. French has for a long time now been part of the educational policy. But as it has been pointed out, its status had been shamefully poor, thus encouraging neglect by school administrators and students. However, if the teaching and learning of French must be promoted in Nigeria, a change in its status which will require a more dynamic approach will have to be made. That is why the revised edition of the National Policy on Education (1998:8) stipulates

among other things that "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 all schools". In line with this, in the vision 2010 Committee Report of October 1997, it was stated that "effort should be made to expand the teaching of French to cover all levels of education curriculum". Even though many schools are yet to comply with the directive, the status of French in the country has improved considerably. With this new development, it is not surprising to note that the teaching of French has taken off in most of the Nursery/Primary Schools of the nation, and French is now competing with science to mark out a "good school". In addition, the government in collaboration with the French Embassy in Nigeria has developed a piece-meal pilot project. The project aims at selecting a school in each local government area for the teaching of French. The materials for the pilot school are backed up by the French Government which has actually agreed to defray some of the cost by sponsoring a given number of French teachers to train in France or in a francophone country annually. About seven language centres and seven Alliances Françaises currently exist in all the country and prominent among them is the Nigeria French Language Village in Badagry.

3. Recommendations

The learning of French should be made compulsory at all levels of secondary school education, irrespective of the area of specialization of the student. Also, in the tertiary institutions, it should be included in the general studies programme for all students. The year abroad programme at the tertiary institution level should be revisited. This is because it is very essential to equip students of French with a full-year acculturation in the natural environment of the language.

More teachers of French should be recruited while better conditions of service be made available to teachers of French at all levels of our educational system.

International trends in universities and other higher institutions in the country should be promoted. This will boost the standard of the nation's higher education to international standards.

More importantly, the Nigerian society as a whole owes the nation a duty not to be left behind in the race for survival, self-fulfillment and progress in the 21st century. Therefore, the teaching and learning of foreign languages should be given adequate attention.

Conclusion

Attempt has been made to highlight a number of reasons why the French language needs to feature more prominently in our national activities and personal business. National development is viewed from political, economic, socio-cultural and educational angles. No Nigerian can afford to be an island whatever may be his or her career interest, religious upbringing, ethnic identity, socio-cultural background and so on. As the giant of Africa, Nigeria needs to open up more to other parts of West Africa and the world.

References

- Adekunle, M.A. (1976). "National Language Policy and Planning: The Nigerian Situation" In C.M.B. Brann (ed) *West African Journal of Modern Languages* No. 1.
- Brann, C.M.B. (1978). Multilingualism of Education in Nigeria. B-137 Québec Centre International de Recherche Université Laval, *Nigerian's Rough Road to Freedom M.1*.
- Broughton, G., Brumfit, C. Flavell, B., Hill, P., Princas A. (1980). *Teaching English as a Foreign Language*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.
- Clark, L.J. (1988). *Curriculum Renewal in School Foreign Language Learning*. Oxford University Press, London.
- Crystal, D. (1992). *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*. Cambridge University Press.
- Elugbe, B.O. (1990). "National Language and National Development", in *Multilingualism, Minority and Language Policy in Nigeria*. Emenajo (ed) E.N Agbor Central Books Ltd. Federal Republic of Nigeria (1998). National Policy on Education. Lagos: NERDC Press 3 edition.
- Hansford, K. et al (1976). *Index of Nigerian Language*. Summer Institute of Linguistic. Ghana No. 5

Nwanze, S. (1997). "The Merits and Politics of French as Official Language" In *National Concord*, June 23, p.7

Ojo, A.S. (1997). "French Language in Nigeria" (1) In *The Guardian*. May 5, p.35 Rivers, W.M. (1970). *The Teaching of Foreign Language Skills*. University of Chicago Press Limited, London.