

An Appraisal of the State of French Language Teaching and Learning in Nigerian System of Education

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Abstract

Nigeria as a nation is compassed by francophone countries. Hence it has become imperative to adopt French as the second official language, beside English. This same reason led to its inclusion as a compulsory subject in junior secondary school level in the reviewed National Policy on Education (2013, 2016). This paper evaluated the state of French language teaching and learning in the Nigerian education system. It further highlighted the relevance of French language in Nigeria. It identified some challenges faced by French education in Nigeria. The paper recommends that Nigerian government should recruit more trained and retrained teachers of French language to fill the numerous vacancies in various institutions, among others.

Keywords: French Language, Imperative, Impediments, Francophone, French Education

Introduction

It is no exaggeration to state that no other sector in Nigeria has suffered more buffeting than the education sector. The Nigerian education system has had no shortage of laws and official government declarations to guide it. Unfortunately, education across the country has been on the downward slide both in standard and quality over the last few decades. This is in spite of several government pronouncements and documents to the contrary. A few indices will suffice to buttress the point. According to Gogura (2019), if anyone is to go on a casual visit to his Alma Mata in any part of the country and see for themselves what the institution has become. Does it look like the school that produced those today's professors, doctors, barristers, engineers, bureaucrats, etc.? Without any exaggeration, anybody (with a heart) will come to tears at the end of their visit. The experience would even get worse if anyone engages an average student of the school in a conversation on any subject. You would be amazed at the level of ignorance. How did we get here?

The objective of this study is to evaluate the state of the French language in the Nigerian education system today: the need for its teaching and learning in schools as well as the problems bedeviling the development of the language in Nigerian schools in particular, and among the citizenry in general. It is hoped that this modest effort will not only help to reexamine the lot of the French language in the Nigerian education system, but also throw more light on the need to rescue it from its current deplorable state, thus giving it the pride of place it deserves, in line with the various government policies and educational enactments on the subject.

The Imperative of French in the Nigerian Education System

There is a need for French in the Nigerian education system and, by implication, for the Nigerian citizenry in general. The following reasons will suffice to underscore the point, although the list is by no means exhaustive.

1. For good-neighborliness
2. For international diplomacy
3. For business
4. For education and intellectual development
5. For technological development
6. For tourism
7. For leisure
8. For national security
9. For proselytization

As for the *raison d'être* of French in the Nigerian school curriculum, this concern has been adequately addressed by this categorical statement in the 1998 edition of the national policy on education: "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 shall be compulsory in Nigerian schools."

However, despite this position taken by government, the practical realization of this lofty idea is another matter altogether. Suffice it to say that, officially and realistically, French language is an imperative for the Nigerian citizen. Even without government prompting, the Nigerian personality should not only want to be part of the fast evolving global village but also participate fully in its social, economic, and political endeavors. It is also true that French language is one of the dominant mediums of this unstoppable evolution. Needless to add, this dominant role of the French language has long been acknowledged universally, especially in the West African sub-region. Sonaiya (2007) opined that there is no reason for Nigerians to limit themselves to English language as their only international language.

French is an obvious foreign language choice for all Nigerians, important as it is in our sub-region, West Africa, and flanked on all sides as we are by French speaking countries. This is particularly true in the northern states of Adamawa, Borno, Sokoto, Kastina and Taraba. Paradoxically, it is in these states that the teaching and learning of French has remarkably declined. But the situation has not always been like that. One of the *Langue de Grande Communications* is French!

Sonaiya (2007) further noted that if speaking different languages is seen as a barrier separating human beings and capable of leading to fundamental misunderstanding and ultimately war, then learning another person's language should be seen as an act of constructing a bridge across the divide and a means of establishing, promoting or restoring good *entente* among the peoples of the world.

Learning French in the Nigerian context is for communication and understanding with our neighbours across cultural and linguistic divides. There is much to lose when one goes beyond one's country of origin and cannot understand one's neighbours. Hence the statement in the Nigerian bilingual language policy: "for a good relationship with our neighbours, it is desirable for all Nigerians to speak French. French shall be the second official language and it shall be compulsory in schools" (NPE, 1998).

The Practical Relevance of French in Nigeria

French language has tremendous advantages in Nigeria. Gogura (2019) stated that a bilingual civil servant is a tremendous asset, not only in the ministry of external affairs but also, indeed, in all ministries of government. For example, the bilingual civil servant attending an international meeting will not have to depend on the services of interpreters. Moreover, most vital agreements are reached not in the conference hall but in the frank and free discussions that go on in the "corridors." The chances of reaching such agreements, no doubt, depend largely on the ability to understand one another's official language. A diplomat representing his country in international forums cannot depend on interpreters to promote understanding and cooperation between his country and the host country or even to market his country abroad.

Another important area where the French language will be of immense benefit for the Nigerian citizen is tourism. Just as the Nigerian tourist would derive maximum benefit from his visit to France or other French speaking countries if he can get around in the French language, so also the Nigerian tour operator would greatly enhance his business if he can relate to French and francophone tourists in their own language. But it is not all about international relations and commerce. There are numerous other spheres of human endeavor where the Nigerian citizen will benefit from his competence in the French language. Competence in French language is not limited to the acquisition of linguistic skills alone, but rather extends to the acquisition of a profound knowledge of arts and culture of the indigenous speakers of the language. Through learning the French language, awareness

is created and cross fertilization of cultural and philosophical ideologies is achieved. This is an invaluable asset to the Nigerian intellectual. There is no gainsaying the fact that Nigeria is a country hungry for technological breakthrough. To achieve this breakthrough, education of the youth must be paramount in the country's order of priorities. Competence in the French language affords the Nigerian youth the opportunity to pursue further studies especially in science and technology in France (ABAH 2016).

Another important angle through which one looks at the relevance of French in Nigeria is the geographical position of Nigeria, which has been mentioned earlier. Okeke (1999) observed that, for Nigeria's leadership role with ECOWAS to be more meaningful, Nigerians should be able to speak the official languages of the other member countries in the sub-regional community, which is predominantly French.

It is pertinent to note that France is one of the eight most technologically advanced countries in the world and is a major partner in the Nigerian economy; especially in petroleum, manufacturing, construction and commerce. Nigerians should, therefore, take full advantage of the various scholarships and training programs offered in assistance by the French government and various French companies operating in Nigeria: Elf, Total, Peugeot, Bougues, Dumez, SCOA, CFAO, etc. In the area of employment, it is also pertinent to note that the trend in the emerging global village is that competence in a foreign language like French is a prerequisite in many national and international organizations. Competence in the French language would, therefore, greatly enhance the employment potentials of the Nigerian youths, not only in Africa but also all over the world. It has been observed that Nigerians are yet to fully exploit their natural capacity for learning languages, because they have often limited themselves to their local languages (Sonaiya, 2007). The result is that they are not competitive enough in vying for international jobs which require competence in international languages.

From the foregoing, it is evident that the French language is not only desirable but indeed necessary for the Nigerian citizen. However, the need for the language has not been matched with accessibility to it in the country. Despite the federal government's declaration of intent regarding the status of French language in Nigeria, very little has been achieved in practical terms toward making the language available to those who would like to learn it. This is probably why Emenanjo (2000) has classified French as an endangered language in a class by itself and, therefore, deserves a very special and practical consideration in the Nigerian education system. There was a time when the Nigerian education system accorded the teaching and learning of French language its rightful place. But all this now seems like history. A little historical perspective would be necessary here.

The Golden Years

The teaching of French in Nigeria schools dates back to the 1960s; especially after the meeting of the organization of African Unity where member countries collectively took a decision to promote the learning of one another's languages for the enhancement of good neighborliness. From its introduction in the early 1960s, the teaching and learning of the French language has gone through both smooth and turbulent waters. Gogura (2019) observed that, in Nigeria, the underlying philosophy of teaching and learning of French has remained virtually the same over the last five decades: for understanding, information, and communication. For macro-economic and political considerations, French language teaching and learning received a boost in the 1970s and the 1980s. This was ostensibly necessitated by Nigeria's need to play her perceived role in Africa and in the integration of the West African sub-region in particular. To achieve these objectives, everything was done to make the study of French pleasurable and rewarding for the students. For example, the year abroad language immersion programme (LIP) which is a vital element in language acquisition was funded by the federal government with assistance from the French government. Students had the opportunity to really immerse in the French language in France or in a francophone country during a whole year at almost no cost to the students or their parents. This is what gave the edge in learning the oral aspect of the language in particular. There are also several other aspects of foreign language learning that are imbedded and which cannot be provided otherwise.

Today, students of French in Nigerian universities and colleges of education mostly undergo the language immersion programme in the Nigerian French language village, Badagary near Lagos and on self-sponsorship. How can the outcome be the same? It is, therefore, no wonder that, today, Nigerian students are scared of offering French especially at the tertiary level. In the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and even 1990s, Nigerian French language teachers used to benefit from various types of professional refresher courses in France, in order to update their knowledge and skills with new methods of teaching French as a foreign language. The cost was entirely borne by the French government. Nowadays, this vital element in the production of high caliber teachers is only being offered by the center for French teaching and documentation in Jos. This is a poor imitation of what obtained in French institutions in Besançon, Grenoble, Le Mans, Bordeaux, etc. In the good old days, even secondary school students were encouraged in their efforts to learn the French language. One particular programme that stood out in this regard is the inter-secondary school French drama competition which was held annually. Apart from the prizes given to the schools that excelled, individual students who excelled in the completion were generously rewarded with trips to France or francophone countries. The above contributed in no small measure in creating awareness of French among young students; some of whom would go on to offer French at the higher level. In addition to the above, there was also the Alliance Française in selected cities across Nigeria who worked assiduously to promote the learning of French language by offering certificate and diploma courses to interested members of the host community. There were also French language centers in some state capitals manned by French coopérants sent from France. They offered similar services to those of the Alliances.

The Present

It is a generally accepted truism in scientific discourse that what goes up must come down. But this should not apply to education. Other nations of the world have kept moving upward, even in the attention they accord to the learning of languages like French. A little look at the present state of things regarding the teaching and learning of French in Nigeria will convince every sensible observer that something has badly gone wrong and that something needs to be done to rescue this ship from sinking.

It is, perhaps, pertinent at this juncture to restate the general objectives of French language teaching in Nigerian schools. The 1998 edition of the National Policy on Education (NPE, 1998) stated that, for the smooth interaction with our neighbor's, it is desirable for every Nigerian to speak French. Accordingly, French shall be the second official language in Nigeria and shall be compulsory in schools. Thus, the decision to move French from the elective bracket to the core line in the secondary school curriculum, whose general objective can be summarized thus, right from the junior secondary school syllabus which states that at the end of the JSS classes the pupil, should be able to:

1. Comprehend without difficulty simple spoken French necessary for day-to-day interactions.
2. Speak simple intelligible French appropriately in different language situations, in a way to be understood by other users of the language.
3. Read correctly, coherently and with comprehension simple French texts,
4. Write simple French in a manner within the structure, lexicon and orthography of the language.

It is, however, sad to note that, even at the end of their senior secondary school education, students of French are nowhere near achieving the competencies stated above. This sorry state of affairs is what plays out at the university level as observed by Simire (1998), a lecturer in the Nigerian French language village, Badagry:

Nous avons été ébahis de remarquer que ces étudiants 'privés' en fin de module 3 (environs 6 mois) n'arrivent à s'exprimer en français et formuler des phrases grammaticalement acceptables. Ce qui à notre grand étonnement n'est pas le cas de nos étudiants universitaires qui ont plusieurs

années de langue derrière eux et qui ont des difficultés à conjuguer des verbes du premier groupe au présent.

We are shocked to discover that those ‘private’ students at the end of module 3 (about 6 months) are not able to express themselves in French and make sentences that are grammatically acceptable. This, to our great surprise, is not the case with our university students who have had several years of French behind them and who still have difficulties in conjugating verbs of the first group in the present tense.

A lot has been said about the sorry state of the teaching and learning of French in Nigerian schools and even in the tertiary institutions. For example, in her contribution on the subject, Mbanefo (1998) states:

Une chose est clair: c'est que depuis bientôt deux décennies la survie du français au Nigéria est terriblement menacé. La meilleure façon de saisir l'ampleur de cette menace serait peut-être d'analyser les faits du point de vue du triangle matière, enseignant, apprenant

One thing is clear: since almost two decades now the survival of French language in Nigeria has been terribly threatened. The best way to underscore the gravity of the problem is sharp to analyse the facts from the perspective of the triangle of subject, teacher and learner.

Of the various issues raised by Mbanefo (2009) in her article, the problem of lack of teachers is of interest to this discuss as the following except seems to buttress:

Evoquer une menace à la survie du français au Nigéria c'est également évoquer les problèmes suivants: le manque de professeurs en général, la rareté des professeurs qualifiés, la qualité minable de l'enseignement, le manque de matériels didactiques.

To talk about the threat to the survival of French in Nigeria is to evoke the following problems: the lack of teachers in general, the scarcity of qualified teachers, the deplorable qualities of teaching and the lack of instructional materials.

The scenario painted above is responsible, in large part, for the state of affairs in Nigerian schools where, although French features conspicuously on the time-table, teaching does not take place due to lack of teachers. One of the most intractable problems facing the teaching and learning of French in Nigeria is the inability to match official declarations with concrete actions.

So far, government's position has been no more than half-hearted attempts at compelling public secondary schools and colleges to include French in their curriculum offerings, without providing the necessary manpower and equipment for effective teaching of the language (Gogura, 2006).

Effective teaching and learning of French in Nigeria schools requires not only the provision of up-to-date equipment, but, more importantly, well trained practitioners of the language. The absence of these two vital components of the learning situation has greatly contributed to the less than ideal situation where the teaching and learning of French have either regressed or stagnated throughout the country over the years. Gogura (2006) noted that it is an undisputable fact that Nigeria does not have adequate supply of the high caliber of French language teachers required to raise the level of the language in the country. The following table reflecting the availability and deployment of French teachers in public secondary schools in Adamawa state graphically exposes this situation:

S/N	SCHOOL	B.A. FRENCH	NCE
1.	GDSS MAPEO	-	1
2.	GSS JADA	-	1
3.	GJSS KOMA-JADA	-	1
4.	GJSS BINYERI	1	1
5.	GDSS SHANGUI-HONG	-	1
6.	GJSS HONG	1	2
7.	GJSS GOMBI	-	1
8.	GDSS MUCHALA	-	1
9.	GDSS LAMORDE	-	1
10.	GDSS BAZZA	-	1
11.	GSS BAZZA	-	1
12.	AMC (SS) YOLA	-	1
13.	AMC (SS) YOLA	3	-
14.	GDSS NAMTARI	-	1
15.	GDSS YOLDE-PATE	-	1
16.	GDSS (JSS) NJOBOLYO	-	1
17.	GDSS (JSS) CAPIYAL	-	2
18.	GDSS (SS) LUGGERE	1	-
19.	GGSS (SS) YOLA	2	1
20.	GMMC (JSS) YOLA	-	2
TOTAL		9	21

French Teachers in Adamawa State secondary Schools: Availability and deployment, 1998.

Source: Adamawa State Post Primary Schools Board.

Never mind that the above table reflects the general picture of lack of French teachers in Adamawa State Schools about ten years ago. The situation has not changed much today. It would not be an exaggeration to say that this is the general picture in most States of the Federation, especially the Northern States. It is, no doubt, this bleak picture that prompted a renowned authority on French language teaching in Nigeria to declare at an important forum that "French is an endangered language in a class by itself" (Emenanjo, 1999). In practical terms, the implication of the above scenario is that immediate measures need to be taken to stem the decline of French language teaching in Nigerian schools.

Impediments

One of the most glaring contradictions of the teaching and learning of French in Nigeria is the inability to match official declaration with concrete actions. Having given the necessary official backing to the development of French language in Nigeria, the government has failed to give the much needed material backing to facilitate the effective teaching and learning of the language at all levels of the education system. So far, government position has been no more than half-hearted attempts at compelling public secondary schools and colleges to include French in their curriculum offerings, without providing the necessary manpower and equipment for the effective teaching of the language.

The result is that, in Nigeria, most schools still teach French like Latin; using the Grammar-T translation Method, with the result that Nigerian students of French get into the university or colleges of education incapable of holding a decent conversation in the language.

What has happened to all those modern methods of teaching French? Until 1990, Nigerian colleges and universities could boast of language laboratories equipped with such programmes as *En France comme si vous étiez*, *Voix et images de France*, *De Vive Voix*, *bonne Koule*, *Studio Cent*, *Entrée Libre*, *practical French*, *Pierre et Seydou*, *Ony va*, *Je démarre*, et *J 'avance*, to mention Just a few. Today, there are very few institutions that can boast of a functional language laboratory, let alone a full complement of modern programmes for teaching French. Government's noble goal of promoting the teaching and learning of French in Nigeria cannot be achieved unless the language is taught in modern and practical ways, using modern methods in appropriate environments and by knowledgeable, well trained and motivated teachers. Sadly, all these necessary ingredients are either in short supply or not available at all. French is a foreign language in Nigeria and it is quite distinct from the numerous native languages and English, which is the country's official language. The learning process of a foreign language differs radically from that of the native code. For while the latter is acquired intuitively solely by an infant in the indigenous environment, foreign language learning is characterized by serious and systematic programming under specific conditions. The foreign language learner being a linguistic adult, the leaning pathway for him or her is riddled with problems originating from several factors: age, linguistic interference, adult complex, reprehensible speech habits, etc. Hence, the need for careful programming and conditioning of the learner is compelling. This is because the acquisition of foreign language is a systematic and a linguistically orderly process.

Conclusion and Recommendations

From the point of view of this study, it is observed that French language teaching and learning is in a sorry state in Nigerian education system. The experience has been both bitter and sweet. It is bitter because it might have aroused sympathy for French language, its teachers and students in Nigeria. Sweet because all hope is not lost, despite the sorry state of things. It is no use throwing up hands in despair because of the bleak picture painted.

. In order to make French more relevant than it is at the moment and equally sustain its relevance, the following steps are recommended:

1. The Nigeria language policy should move from theoretical stage to the practical and effective implementation of the language policy which will give French language teaching and learning a priority
2. The Nigerian government should employ more well trained teachers of French to fill the vacancies available in various institutions of learning.
3. The teachers and students of French language should be motivated by the government with special packages and awards.
4. Adequate equipment of French language laboratories with modern facilities
5. The using of multi grading teaching methods
6. The study of French should begin at the early stage of a child's academic training

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