



FRENCH LANGUAGE AS PANACEA FOR NATIONAL SECURITY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper discusses foreign language as a veritable tool for the promotion of national security and social stability. It looks at the adoption of French language in Nigeria as an indispensable tool in making Nigeria a true multilingual country. However, the learning of French language is faced with problems that hamper the realizations of this goal. It is equally argued in this paper that unlike any of the indigenous and foreign languages, French language does not engender any religious, political and ethnic hostilities; rather it ensures peaceful co-existence within a country and the world at large. Therefore this paper is set out to examine the role of foreign languages in peace and conflict prevention. The paper concludes with some recommendations that will enhance the teaching and learning of French as a foreign language so as to promote international cooperation.

Key words: Brief history of teaching and learning of French, Political influence of French language in Nigeria and importance of French Language and Economic, security and social roles of foreign language in Nigeria.

Introduction

Language is defined by the Oxford Learner's Dictionary (1997) as the system of communication in speech and writing used by people of a particular country or areas as a means of communication among themselves. Fromkim and Bodman in Yilben, Gokum and Goyit (2010), affirm that whatever else people do when they come together-whether they play, fight, make love or make automobiles, they talk. We live in a world of language. According to Authur (1996), language is a human system of communication which uses

structured vocal sounds and can be embodied in other media such as writing, print and physical signs.

Language, therefore is seen as the vehicle through which people's culture is transmitted. According to Nwadikeas cited in Olaoye (2010), says language is the key to the heard of people. If we lose the key, we lose the people, if we treasure the key and keep it safe, it will unlock the door to wealth or affluence, thus bringing about national development.

To these scholars language and culture are inseparable, they have a symbolic relationship which is mutually beneficial to each other. While language embraces the preservation and transmission of culture, the latter nurtures it along with the socio-political and economic affiliations at work within the society.

Language acquisition starts from childhood. In most cases an individual masters his mother tongue before acquiring second and third languages as the case may be. However, it is a special case where an individual right from his childhood is put into using two or three different languages. According to linguists, a young child has a wide capacity of acquiring several languages at a time. On the contrary, an adult needs to put in more effort to acquire a second language.

The Nigerian linguistics terrain presents to us a multilingual country considering the geographical multiplicity of the ethnic groups. By extension, since language represents the soul of culture, one can say that Nigeria is a multicultural country. We can equally say without any doubt that majority of Nigerians most especially the learned are multilingual. This is because most of them apart from their mother tongues can speak one or two of the three major languages (i.e. Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo) and English being the official language of the country. However, in this paper we shall discuss the introduction of French as the second foreign language in the country. Fortunately, it was the former head of state late General Sani Abacha in 1997 at Burkina Faso declared French as second official language in Nigeria (Dandam 2006).

Our work in this paper would be in three parts. Firstly, by presenting the position of French language in Nigeria. We shall try to consider the importance as it relates to national security and social stability. Finally, the study shall suggest ways of preventing some of the political, religious and ethnic conflicts.

Brief History of the Teaching and Learning French in Nigeria

Teaching of French as a subject in Nigeria Started just after independence. It was precisely after the famous Cameroun conference that took place in Yaounde in 1961 where the decision of introducing second foreign language in the member countries was taken. This decision was informed by the vision of breaking the barriers of communication between the ancient British and French colonies. Initially, the teaching of French started in some few missionary schools. There was no encouragement on the part of the British who considered the teaching of French in Nigeria as a form of competition with English. According to Ojo (1998), this lack of encouragement did not only manifest on the part of England but also on the part of France. For instance, during the late 60s, the relationship of France towards Nigeria was more of a cold war. It was because of this that France even supported the rebel of Biafra during the Nigerian civil war. Certainly, one would not expect any cultural or linguistics cooperation between the two countries that would promote the teaching of French in Nigeria.

During the 70s there was an encouragement to read French by the government. This was seen by the introduction of French as subject in most schools, colleges and universities in the country, which led to the increase in the population of French students in these various schools. Government increased the sponsorship for the 'year abroad programme' due to the oil boom. But in the 80s there was a decline in this sponsorship due to the financial implication of it to the country, coupled with the introduction of the new policy on education in 1981 which made French an optional subject in the secondary schools curriculum. This made it difficult for poor students to sponsor themselves for the abroad programme. But in January 1992 the government improved this difficult condition by the establishment of Nigeria French language village in Badagry. This institution serves as an inter-university centre for French studies where the French learners that cannot afford to go abroad can go there and perfect their spoken ability. The main mission or task of this institution as said by the first director Professor Ade Ojo Samuel in his speech at the 1st international workshop for French teachers in Nigeria held between 26th July – 1st August 1992 “is to do away with all the negative things that prevent the spreading of French in our country”.

The teaching and learning of French is faced with so many problems; some of these problems are insufficient manuals and other French books. Even the ones that are available are very costly for the poor students.

There is also insufficient French teachers in the country. During the 80s the country imported French teachers from the Francophone countries which boosted the teaching and learning of French but sadly between 1983 and 1984, Nigerian government sent foreigners back to their countries and that affected the teaching of French because among most of the people sent were French teachers.

It is equally good to mention here that some directors and principals have negative attitude towards the teaching of French. They do not look at it as a good subject. This is why some of them don't even allocate enough period for the subject on the school time-table.

Mbuko (2009) sums it up that the problems of the teaching and learning of French have their roots administratively, socially, religiously and even at the family level.

French Language and its Political Influence in Nigeria

Nigeria is surrounded by Francophone countries like republic of Benin in the West, Cameroun in the East, Niger republic in the North and Chad in the North-East. It is also good to note that most of the West African countries are Francophones. The political implication of this development for Nigeria is that French is needed so that those people going out of the country can communicate freely and have a good cohabitation in these sister countries. For instance, there are so many decisions to take in the sub-regions that necessitate the cooperation of all the member countries. Some of these decisions need a vote to resolve them and in that situation, it is clear that the Francophones will have their way and will always dominate. An example is the election of the president of Benin republic Dr. Boni Yayi as the Chairman of AU on the 29th January, 2012 (Vanguard newspaper) and that of Alhassan Watara of Coted'ivoire as the ECOWAS Chairman on the 17th Feb. 2012. The only solution to this political impasse in the sub-region is for Nigeria to fully adopt French as the second official language. This will permit Nigerian representatives to understand and be capable of defending the Nigerian political cause in ECOWAS and other important meetings in the sub-region.

The former president of Ghana late Dr. Kwame Nkrumah made French a second official language in Ghana and today the Ghanians speak French better than Nigerians. And of course Ghana has a better cordial political relationship with the Francophones of the West Africa and the world at large. This decision would improve the formation and selection of officers that will work with the international organizations.

Importance of Foreign Language Education

The first importance of learning foreign languages is to make an individual open to the outside world. An individual that masters English and French is freer in relating with other people of the world, be it in Anglophone or Francophone countries. According to Jean Pierre Jendel (1979), Cited by Ade Ojo (1998), adds that a bilingual person maintains his same social level in the two linguistic circumstance.

The aspect of career or profession is another area where a bilingual person makes a lot of success. According to Orodiran (1992) bilingualism permit an individual to succeed well in his career. For instance a multilingual Engineer can get contract of any kind in any part of the world. This will help him work with other Engineers and supervise his work without the help of an interpreter.

A Nigerian medical Doctor that speaks French can participate in the technical Aids corps programme in any of the Francophone countries. This make the patients to freely express themselves without talking through a translator.

The receptionist in a commercial organization is an important officer considering his role in the establishment. He is the first contact point for customers. He can receive guest from Francophone countries if he speaks French but if not he will need the help of an interpreter.

A multilingual commercial attaché is needed during sales promotion so as to give information on products to customers.

Other categories of professionals who need to be good in foreign languages are the custom officers, immigration officers, police, Army and officers of international agencies like AU, ECOWAS and UN. This is because they work with foreigners as colleagues.

Foreign Language and National Security in Nigeria

National security is defined by Oxford Learners Dictionary (7th edition) as the defence of a country. But up till now Nigerian government has not realized the immense contribution that can engender the adoption of a second official language in the aspect of national security. Multilingualism as relates to national security has to do with the adoption of foreign language in addition to the local languages in the country.

It is good to know that an individual or a nation that does not understand its neighbours risks not being understood by those that would help him during danger or crises. Therefore, Nigeria needs French In addition to English and other languages so as to facilitate understanding with her neighbour.

The knowledge of foreign language will equip the customs and immigration officers to function well at the borders. These two institutions were not only established to arrest or stop contraband goods and illegal movement of persons but also to intercept and decode messages and mails that constitute danger to the national security.

The officers of the Army Intelligent corps and the police will function well if they

can express themselves in some foreign languages. For instance the international police (Interpol) whose operation consist of external investigation will function well if they are good in some foreign languages.

National security should be the work of all Nigerians. The lack of understanding between Nigerian and Cameroun over Bakassi peninsula would have been amicably resolved if the security agents understood each other. This is because dialogue is the best way of resolving a conflict. The Bomb Blast and other security traits by the Boko Haram sect in the country would be better resolved if Nigerians understand the languages of the neighbouring countries since the accusation is that the attack is alien to the country and some of the attackers are foreigners. This is in conformity to the saying that a problem is better and easily resolved if the two partners understand each other.

Foreign Language and Socio-Cultural and Economic Development in Nigeria

Nigeria is the giant of Africa, it is very vast and rich in culture due to the multiplicity of the ethnic groups. According to Ajeleti and Oladeji (2011) Nigeria is a multilingual state with almost 400 indigenious languages each having its cultural identity. The Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo are the major ethnic groups with distinct cultures. Such a country need to be open to the external world to make known its rich culture. The best way to do this is to mobilize the citizen to proclaim these riche cultural heritage. The acquisition of foreign languages is a veritable instrument that facilitated this task. This can be in form of literal production, music in English, Spanish, Chinese, French, Arabic etc and several other art works. The country would benefit these foreign languages in the aspect of sport, if the players can talk to one another without an interpreter, much of the conflicts would be averted.

In the area of economic development most Nigerians are amateurs in external commerce and tourism. Most of the neighbouring countries are Francophones, and a Nigerian tourist who speaks French will enjoy his stay in these neighbouring countries better than he that can only speak English. With this, the Nigerian Economy will attract Francophone, Spanish and Chinese investors to establish industries and other touristic comfort centres. This will create employment and increase revenue generation for the country. The government will have more money to construct roads and other social infrastructure. Health, transport and education sectors would be better off if this is given the desired attention.

When the social and economic sectors are properly handled, youths will be engaged and would not be used to forment trouble. This will bring about social stability in the country.

Conclusion

Language education is capable of eradicating illiteracy. It provides political awareness and socio-political stability. Government's programmes and policies will reach the grassroots with the use of indigenious languages and be communicated to other countries through foreign language. National unity depends largely on mutual understanding of each other's language and culture. This is why Ajelti and Oladeji (2011) affirm that Nigeria considers it to be in the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major Nigerian languages other than his own mother tongue. Unity means strength or power and it is language that empowers and unifies people. Language therefore, confers power on a nation.

For language to play its roles in the area of national security, social stability and conflict prevention. The federal government of Nigeria needs to be more committed to foreign language education. A more serious commitment entails the following:

- ❖ Well planned and implemented foreign language education policy
- ❖ Better and improved funding of education especially the production of quality teachers, provision of modern instructional materials.
- ❖ Promotion of the study of linguistics and language education in colleges of education and universities.
- ❖ Better and improved funding of foreign language centre's such as Nigerian French language village Badagry, Arabic Language centre in Maiduguri etc.
- ❖ Sensitization in radio, press and music on the need to be more committed in foreign language education.
- ❖ Improved scholarship for foreign language students and educators.

If the government and all Nigerians can be committed to foreign language education and most Nigerians can speak two or three other foreign languages apart from English being the official language of the country, our relationship with the international communities will be cordial. There will be more cooperation between Nigeria and the neighbouring countries and this will give way for dialogue on how best to handle some of the security challenges in the country. In addition the importance of foreign language in the promotion of national security, stability and conflict prevention cannot be over emphasized as language is a vehicle to pass across the opinion of people from one culture to another.

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