

The Impact of Foreign Language in Nation Building: French as a Case Study

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Abstract

This paper seeks to examine French language education in Nigeria and its future prospects in nation building. French language has been-taught in Nigeria for several decades as a facultative subject taught as a foreign language. Since then, it has witnessed many transformations-and developments to the point of metamorphosing into a language with quasi-official status. The emergence of French for Special Purposes is increasingly necessary in the teaching and learning of the French language in Nigeria. This development is not far from the fact that Nigeria is surrounded by French-speaking countries. French language ranks among the major international languages used in international organizations such as the United Nations Organization (UNO), European Union (EU), African Union (AU), and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), with its headquarters located in Abuja, Nigeria. The presence of French companies such as ELF, CFAO, SCOA, and LAFARGE among others contributes to the growing demand for the French language in Nigeria. Hence, the impact of the French language on nation building cannot be overemphasized. This paper reveals some challenges encountered across different stages of its development (French language) and some future prospects for national development in Nigeria.

Key Words: Foreign Language, French language, challenges, prospects, nation building.

Introduction

Language is one of the most important tools in human existence and development. The earth and all things that exist therein were structured in such a way that relating and cooperating with one another can only be possible through uninterrupted communication. This implies that every individual will understand the purpose of their existence and be able to maximize their God-given opportunities with the help of language as established in the Holy Bible (Genesis 11:1–6). Ever since, no individual or nation can rise above the quality of its relationships which is upheld by communication. Afolayan (1979) states that, “Without language, humans cannot function as cooperative social beings.”

This is evident in the fact that the administration and organization of all human activities, including planning, design, supervision, and implementation, are actualized through language. Alfa-Olasunkade (2005) posits that, “Foreign languages will expose numerous facets of our national languages to the world.” Opportunities for sustainable growth and development are only achievable through effective communication at national and international levels. Therefore, to engage effectively in the global community, communication must not be restricted to indigenous and national languages. This necessity accounts for the introduction of the French language in Nigeria.

Language Education

Education is a process of acquiring knowledge and skill for character building and all round transformation so as to be self-reliant, patriotic and impact positively his near environment and outside world. Education can be formal or informal, whichever form it takes, it is acquired through language. Webster dictionary also defines Education as the knowledge and development resulting from the process of being educated. Language education therefore is the process and practice of teaching a second or a foreign language with four main learning categories namely; communicative competencies, proficiencies, cross-cultural experiences, and multiple literacy (Wikipedia, 2020). Language is considered indispensable in the dealings of man. It is the most important tool in human relations.

French language

French language is a Romance language of the Indo-European family that originated from Vulgar Latin of the Roman Empire. It serves two major purposes in France; mother tongue (L1), and the official language which serves as the language of administration, commerce, sports, and religion respectively. It is a language that is widely spoken by some European countries such as; France, Canada, Belgium, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Seychelles and African countries such as; Benin Republic, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroun, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, DR Congo, Guinea, Gabon, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Togo and many more. French language is an international language of literature and scientific standards. It is also the language of many international organizations such as; the United Nations, the European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the International Olympic Committee, and the International Committee of the Red Cross. (Wikipedia, 2020)

French Language Education in Nigeria

French language learning in Nigeria is traceable to the early 1960s, when the new status of Nigeria as an independent nation called for bilateral relationships with her neighboring countries. The presence of some French companies which already existed in Nigeria also demanded the knowledge and communication skills for recruitment. This made the French language a pressing need for a developing country like Nigeria to grow. Ezeodili (2017) identifies the early status of French learning in Nigeria as a fruitful and glowing one as the enrollment of students for both WASC and GCE between the years 1962–1971 was high, with excellent performance that spurred the motivation given by the French government for a year-abroad scholarship.

Among the first set of beneficiaries were scholars who later became prominent figures in Nigerian academia that have contributed immensely to the advancement of education in Nigeria. Some of these distinguished scholars are: Late Professor S. Ade-Ojo, Professor Abiola Irele, Professor A. U. Ohaegbu, and Professor Tunde Ajiboye, among others.

French was introduced to some premier secondary schools and universities. Some of the schools are: King's College in Lagos, Government College in Ibadan, the University of Ibadan and the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, among others (Omolewa, 1978).

Mbuko (2001) outlines the three stages of development of French language learning in Nigeria in order to meet the diplomatic needs arising as a result of the geographical status of Nigeria and to enable effective engagement with neighboring countries in commerce, technological advancement, and global interdependence.

In the early days of French in Nigeria, only expatriates from France and francophone countries who were versed in the language were employed as French teachers. The intensive training given to Nigerians who were beneficiaries of a year-abroad linguistic immersion paved the way for the introduction of the language into the curriculum as a facultative subject.

By this development, Nigerians became competent French teachers, complementing the few expatriates on ground and serving as models for others who would take up the challenge of learning the French language.

In 1990, when the French Government could not continue funding the year-abroad scholarship for Anglophone French learners due to economic constraints, the Federal Government of Nigeria established the French Language Village in Badagry as a local immersion model for university learners of French, aimed at ensuring adequate linguistic competence.

During this period, some private primary and secondary schools included French language as a compulsory subject at the primary and junior secondary levels and as an elective subject at the senior secondary level. The curriculum was designed as Français Langue Étrangère (FLE).

In Nigeria today, French language is regarded as a foreign language as well as the second official language, as declared by the former Head of State, late General Sani Abacha, in 1996. The National Policy on Education (1998 edition), as cited by Fabiyi (2010), stated that French language is necessary for smooth interaction with neighbouring countries and that it shall be compulsory in schools to encourage functional bilingualism among Nigerians (NPE, 1998:9).

Currently in Nigeria, French language learning is on the increase, People are getting acquainted with its future prospects resulting to increase in enrollment both at secondary and in Higher Institutions of learning. There are different centre for French learning, Colleges of Education and Universities running NCE and B.A French/ B.A Ed French programmes. Other centre such as; Alliance Française, Centre for French Teaching and Documentation (CFTD) located in Jos, Enugu, Abuja and in Ibadan which are to encourage the teaching and learning of French language. Atoyebi (2003) identifies some associations created to work hand in hand with the Nigerian Education Research and Development Council (NERDC), such as the Nigerian Association of French Teachers (NAFT), the Modern

language Association of Nigeria (MLAN), the Inter- College Association of French Teachers (INTER-CAFT) and to keep French learners updated on current issues. This development has led to the birth of French for Special Purposes (FSP) in Nigeria.

French for Special Purposes

French for Special purposes is an age long programme that has been in existence in France in the twenties. Lehman (1993) cited by Hsin-I-Lee et al (2010) states that the various content of French for Special Purposes are; Military French in Special Usage, Scientific and Technical French, Instrumental French, Functional French, French for Specific Purpose, Professional French, French for Professional Purposes, French as a Professional Language and French for Academic Purpose. Robinson (1991:22) cited by Owoeye (2010) reveals that French for special purposes takes clues from the various works done in the area of English for Special Purposes and the categorization of English for Special Purposes (ESP) designed by him as shown in the diagram below.

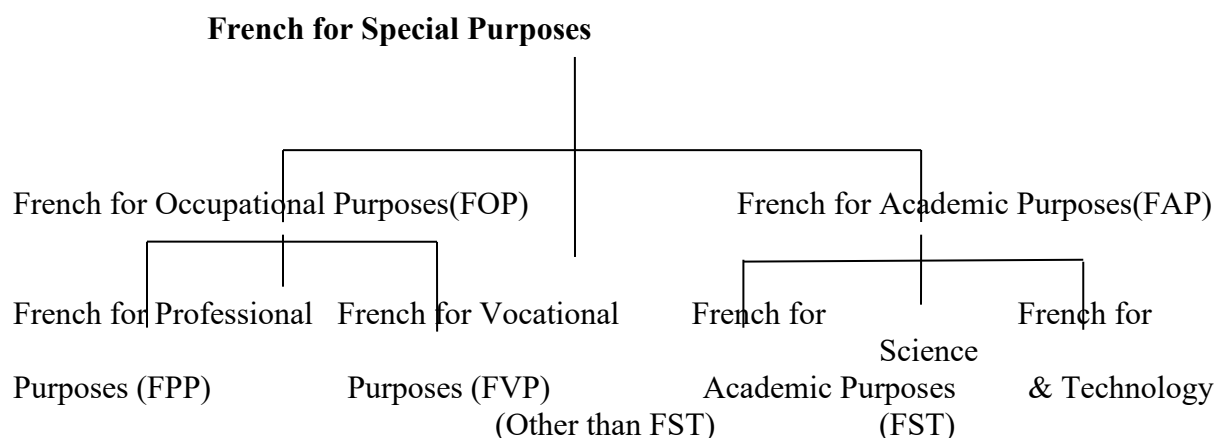


Fig 1. Adopted from Robinson Categorization of ESP cited by Owoeye(2010)

He further states that French for Special Purposes is designed to equip students with both linguistic and communicative competences in a specified discipline as shown in figure 1 above. According to him, it is an innovative programme that will benefit professionals from all walks of life to explore beyond local or national opportunities. Consequently, it will create job opportunities and enhance national development both within and abroad.

Irina et al (2019), state that the current global needs for technological advancement calls for professional communication, competitiveness in the international labour market. This is tantamount to the peculiarity of foreign language such as French language in Nigeria. He further asserts that the use of modern techniques using information technologies such as, audio and video files, including movies, promote mastering of the language of the specialty.

The design of French for Special Purposes is such that is to foster national development since its major goal is to equip learners from different field of studies/ disciplines to be bilingual, there by being proactive, dynamic, efficient and relevant in the 21st century market place. Frantz (1996) in Owoeye (2010) enumerates many benefits that the knowledge of foreign language can bring to a person among which we have:

1. Broadens one's experiences and expands one's view of the world;
2. Encourages critical reflection on the relation of language and culture, language and thought;
3. Fosters an understanding of the interrelation of language and human nature;
4. Contributes to cultural awareness and literacy, such as knowledge of original texts;
5. Builds practical skills (for travel or commerce or as a tool for other disciplines);
6. Improves the knowledge of one's own language through comparison and contrast with the foreign language;
7. Exposes one to modes of thought outside of one's native language;
8. Fosters a sense of relevant past, both cultural and linguistic;
9. Expands opportunities for meaningful leisure activity (travel, reading, viewing foreign language films);
10. Contributes to achievement of national goals, such as economic development or national security;
11. Enables the transfer of training (such as learning a second foreign language).

The above benefits make the learning of French language more demanding in Nigeria for national development. Hence, in order to fully maximize the opportunities foreign language will accrue to the development of a nation like Nigeria, the teaching and learning of French language must be invested upon.

Challenges of French Language Acquisition in Nigeria

Adopting a language as a second language or as a foreign language with the aim of domesticating it is experimental. A lot of commitments, dedication and a great deal of perseverance are required for learners to be kept abreast of the demands needed for effective communication in their mother tongue amidst the numerous influences encountered against the stability of the learners. In the same vein, French language in Nigeria has experienced different challenges which are germane to actualizing the new status. Fabiyi (2010) identifies some factors militating against the implementation of the Government Policy to make French a second official language in Nigeria. They include, insufficient French teachers; inadequate modern resources, such as visual and audio-visual gadgets that could aid the effective teaching-learning process, government policy, lack of interest, poor public support and lack of government support. However, there are some factors yet to be identified which are militating against the implementation of government policies to make French language a second official language. These include:

Foreign Tutors

It is obvious that a foreign language cannot be taught for the first time in a country where it is new without the challenges of tutors. In early sixties, indigenous teachers of French were not available and so it was introduced then with the help of bilingual expatriates who understand English language, which is the official language in Nigeria. Some of the expatriates were French men and some from Francophone countries like Togo, Republique du Benin to mention but a few. The teaching of the language could not go round all the states of the Federation because of its newness and limited number of teachers. Omolewa (1978) observed that French and German were among the earliest subjects introduced into the Wesleyan High School in 1878 and other Nigerian secondary schools like the King's School Lagos in 1909 and the native speakers of both languages were never lacking in the

country in the pioneering days of the subjects. This was possible because some French companies already existed in Nigeria. For a foreign language of such universal value to really gain ground and make positive impact in the development of Nigeria, indigenous teachers are needed.

French as Elective Subject.

For Nigerians to be able to relate well with their neighboring countries, the time allocated for the teaching of French as a language, and second foreign language cannot be enough to build the communication skills of the learners. The four communicative skills, which are: written expression; oral expression; written comprehension and oral comprehension can only be diffused when treated separately. The driving factor of English language as a foreign language that eventually becomes the official language in Nigeria is not far from the fact that it was given a high priority of five periods per week, being a core and an indispensable subject. This gives room for total and effective completion of the contents and communication in all the four language competencies. On the contrary, the periods allocated for French were not stable. Some schools gave three periods and some others allocated two periods because of its elective status. The shortness of the periods allocated for the teaching-learning of French in those years was not encouraging. The volume of the scheme to teach within a short time was another worthwhile challenge to both teachers and the learners. This really hinders the students from developing interest in it and from registering for it in WAEC.

French as a Compulsory subject in Primary schools and Junior Secondary Schools

The declaration of French language as a second official language made by the Ex- dictator, Late Gen. Sanni Abacha and the National Policy on Education published in the Nineties, gave it (French) a new look. It was made compulsory in primary schools and the junior secondary schools as part of implementation process of the 6-3-3-4 system of Education in Nigeria. However, it is to be noted that the major aim of declaring French as a second official language was aborted because it was not well funded and implemented by the government. Some schools lacked French teachers; some French teachers were not even given support needed from their head teacher. This prevented learners from developing interest at it. Some learners that have developed interest at it were confused by the little or no value placed on the Language by their community. The challenges were so frustrating to the point that science students were discouraged from learning French. Only Arts students were encouraged to pursuing it. Series of negative influence from both the home and the society affected the development of French language and hinder it from fully actualizing its declared status.

The Politics of French Education in Nigeria

French language education in Nigeria had a faceless beginning due to the fact that English language has been adopted as the lingua franca in Nigeria. Better still; some noticeable factors as discussed earlier are responsible for its acceptance as a foreign language needed for Nigerians sustainability. Adeniji (2003), points out that the accurate period when French was introduced into the Educational system of Nigeria was not known because the National Policy on Education (1981) did not include French as either a core subject or an elective. The different transformations of French language in Nigeria were supported with Government Policies. But the inconsistency in the implementation of the policies prevented it from taking its course, due to political instability. Till date, the latest declaration of French as the second official language has not been fully implemented.

Prospects of French in Nigeria

Amadi (2015) opines that the main aim of learning French language in Nigeria, is because French language fulfils the four main principles used as conditions to learning a foreign language in a given country, which are principles: of geographical neighborhood, diplomacy, technological advancement and principle of global independence. The Nigerian National Policy on Education (NPE, 1998: 9) as discussed earlier, states that French language is needed for smooth interaction with neighboring francophone countries. Nigeria is also seen as the Giant of Africa whose economic impart should be felt by other African countries both Anglophone and francophone through bilateral relationship which could be encouraged by either English or French language. In light of the above, effective and successful yield to the diversification campaign in Nigeria is seriously glued to the extent at which the government can invest into the learning of French language and the implementation of the different policies made to advance French language as the second official language in Nigeria for the following prospects:

Education

Ignorance, they say is a disease. Education, being the emancipation of the mind to be patriotic and self-reliant, is pertinent to the roles of language in education. French language has so many to offer educationally. The following are some of its benefits to education;

- It gives room for comparative analysis in both linguistic and literary aspects of other languages. For example, “*No longer at Ease*” a literary work of Chinua Achebe is translated into French as “*Le Malaise*” which widens the knowledge of the African writers beyond limits.
- Researchers can explore from the intellectual world in international conferences, colloquiums and inaugural lectures.
- Professionals can better their lots through communication in French language/ French for Special Purposes.
- Job opportunities in the international market are widely open to bilingual graduates than monolingual.
- Open doors for studying abroad (French speaking countries)
- Open doors for networking secondary schools and higher institution and special centre for capacity building both for learners as well as teachers.

Socio-cultural

The sustainability of every citizen is one of the major goals of a nation, to be self-reliant and patriotic. Hence, French language is a tool to concretize French culture cum Nigerian cultures through immersion programme where students showcase their talents as regards; religion, traditions, norms and myths. An adage in French says “*un homme de deux langue vaut deux hommes*” (a man who speaks two languages worth two men) by implication, it is of great value to be bi-lingua. Most importantly, foreign language like French will offer endless socio-cultural opportunities such as:

- Discovering new horizons toward the unknown.
- Open doors for cultural exchange.
- Nigerian cultural values will be promoted, thereby removing the shameful emblem placed on African cultural heritages by the white.

- The desire to learn French opens doors for job opportunities because the different learning centers established to train teachers will employ at least twenty personnel
- Investment is another way to build and sustain a nation's economy. The knowledge of French language will improve the demand on our natural resources.

Economic

In the Eighties to early nineties, Nigeria depended solely on crude oil for her economic development but, today the problem of economic downturn which gave rise to social vices like; corruption, poverty, recession, insurgents, kidnapping and unemployment can best be controlled through diversification. Diversification into agriculture and entrepreneurship without French language is just like tea without sugar. So many modern tools on agriculture and information technology are only effective when their manuals are well understood. This is an opportunity for translators. They can work in French companies / factories. The French nation financial contribution, tagged the European Developmental Fund towards the development of Nigeria cannot be overlooked.

Political

Nigeria is a democratic nation that has suffered so many political challenges like, insecurity, insurgency, and political instability that require logical solution. In 2016, a Military reinforcement was reached by the Nigerian and French Governments respectively to improve the bilateral relationship and to intervene in the fight against insecurity and terrorism in Nigeria. Globally, Nigeria is recognized as the giant of Africa. Her population, economic status (though in the past) and her military capability brought her this honor. But linguistically, her defense is weak. There is limited evidence to suggest that either former or current Nigerian leaders possess proficiency in French language adopted as one of the nation's lingua franca. Therefore, we see a new Nigeria emerging as our leaders in all government sectors will invest in French language learning to meet the 21st century compliances.

French for Nation Advancement

The following will help to maximize the numerous benefits French language will accord Nigeria if its status as second official language is well implemented:

- The periods allocated for French learning in secondary school is not enough to teach language competency skills. Therefore, allocation of more time is required.
- The scheme should be prepared in such a way that it will absorb the four linguistic competencies (listening, writing, speaking and reading) at secondary level.
- Teaching of Comprehension passages should include registers and terminologies.
- A well-furnished French language laboratory with modern information technology should be created in every school as a formation center for secondary school learners.
- The different pedagogical centers should be funded in collaboration with French government to keep French teachers updated.
- French language should be included in General Study Courses (GSC) in all higher institutions of learning from year one till graduating stage.
- Government Leaders from level 12 should be French literate.
- French language should be a prerequisite for political appointment.

- All recommended texts for French learning must pass through the Ministry of Education for proper scrutiny to ensure contents align with the curriculum standard.
- The standard of French Language Village, Badagry should be upgraded to really serve as model of linguistic immersion in abroad with an extension to accommodate places like church, mosque, market, restaurant, pool and mini-bank that encourage socio-cultural activities purely in French language.
- The Federal government should invest in French language for economic sustainability.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to throw light on the structure of French language and the challenges faced in the process of the different transformation experienced till the declaration of its present status in Nigeria. It further showcased the different linguistic developments it has practiced, and highlighted their objectives and justified the rationale for the programme. We have been able to discuss the prospects of French language in Nigeria and the consequences to national advancement. Some suggestions were made, which will help in domesticating and actualizing the implementation of Policies made to make French an official language in Nigeria. It has been observed that the various stages of development of French in Nigeria received government backing in terms of policy. Therefore, continuity in implementation of government policies in Nigeria should be constitutionalized. More so, the twenty-first century compliances is a global race with two identical languages, the English and French languages respectively. Each nation is expected to key in to the demand and the visualized aura. It is therefore important to underscore the point that French Language in Nigeria is a panacea to sustainable economy.

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