

CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS IN FRENCH STUDIES IN NIGERIAN COLLEGES OF EDUCATION

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Abstract

French is one of the major languages of the developed and developing countries of the world. It is estimated that over one-third of the world's population speaks the language either as mother tongue or official language. In response to the need for improved international relationship, especially among world bodies such as the AU and ECOWAS, French was introduced into Nigeria's educational system in the 1960s. The teaching and learning of the language had been flourishing in the nation's higher institutions until recently when enrolment for the subject began to nose-dive. This paper takes a look at the factors responsible for this phenomenon and discusses the prospects of French studies in Nigerian colleges of education with the hope that the language would again occupy a pride of place in Nigeria's educational system.

Of all the languages of the whole wide world, French is one of the most widely spoken, codified and internationally recognized. It is the native language of many advanced countries such as France, Belgium, Switzerland and Quebec provinces of Canada. As a result of territorial expansion arising from French and Belgian colonial adventures of the 17th and 18th centuries, the language spread to vast areas in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean Islands. Today, French is spoken in almost one-third of the countries of the world, either as mother tongue, second or official language or as third or foreign language. On the African continent alone, there

are not less than fifteen countries speaking French as their official language. All these countries, peoples and institutions constitute what is referred to as "la francophonie" (fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/francophonie).

It needs be added that French is of utmost importance in international cross-current of ideas. It is second to only English as a language of discourse in international fora such as the United Nations, the European Union, African Union and the Economic Community of West African States. It is therefore a first-rate administrative language.

History of French in Nigeria

The advent of French in Nigeria dates back to the colonial era when Christian missionaries taught the language in their mission schools. Imasuen (1988) noted that Irish Catholic priests taught French language in seminaries to their students (seminarians) as part of their religious education. At this period, French was restricted in use to these religious institutions and was therefore not an essential part of Nigeria's educational programme. It was not until 1960 when the language was officially introduced into the Nigerian educational system. Even at this period, the language was restricted to a few elitist schools as the Nigerian government still had no explicit policy regarding the teaching of French in schools. As a matter of fact, Latin was the preferred subject then.

However, in 1963, at the inauguration of the Organisation of African Unity (now

African Union), Nigeria became confronted with the problem of communication with her counterparts in the organization, majority of which were francophone. It was at this level that the organization resolved that member-states should introduce French and English in their educational systems. As from this period, Nigeria had to replace Latin with French in her educational system. This therefore marked the beginning of the rise of French as one of the languages contending for recognition in Nigeria's socio-economic and educational systems.

Furthermore, Nigeria's strategic position in the West African sub-region necessitated the inclusion of French in her curriculum: All her immediate neighbours – the Republic of Benin, Niger, Chad and Cameroon are French speaking countries. The country is also a leading member of the ECOWAS. It was the realization of these facts that prompted the adoption of French as Nigeria's second official language. Thus, according to Elaho (1999), in advocating the use of French among Nigerians, the late head of state, General Sanni Abacha stated:

We have seen that we are virtually surrounded by French-speaking countries and these French speaking countries are our kith and kin. But because of differences in the languages of our colonial masters, there has been a vacuum in communication with our neighbours. It is in our interest to learn French...

It is therefore no wonder that the teaching and learning of French was entrenched in the National Policy on Education (2004) by our education planners:

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 primary and junior secondary schools...

As regards the teaching and learning of French, it had not been quite easy. As earlier mentioned, the earliest teachers of French in Nigeria were the missionaries whose principal aim was to produce priests with a fair understanding of French. However, when French officially became part of Nigeria's educational system, the first major challenge was the shortage of trained teachers. Akpofure (2000) noted that most schools had to make do with teachers from neighbouring countries. These individuals, quite often, had no training in teaching and their only qualification was that they could speak French. As many of them had little mastery of the English language, they were unable to communicate effectively with their students. The result was that many learners thought that French was a very difficult subject.

It was therefore a welcome development when, around 1968/1969, department of French started to be established in colleges of education in the country with the aim of providing competent and qualified teachers of French. For instance, in Adeyemi College of Education, Ondo, French Department was established in 1968. Other colleges of education soon followed. These included those of Abraka, Agbor, Osiele and a host of others; and for a brief period of time, the teaching of French in the country received a boost.

Challenges

However, in recent times, the fortunes of the language in Nigeria have nose-dived and there is a serious downward trend in the enrolment of candidates for French both in secondary and tertiary institutions. The challenges facing the teaching and learning of French in colleges of education in Nigeria are quite enormous and can be traced to the government, our educational planners, Nigeria's peculiar linguistic situation and the

people in general. These challenges include the following

1. **Apathy:** The New Webster's Dictionary of the English Language (1995) describes apathy as lack of interest, indifference or lack of emotion. In other words, it is a feeling of non-challance towards something. It is quite disheartening that this non-challant attitude towards French studies is exhibited by government, school authorities, parents and students alike. In spite of Nigeria's strategic position in international organizations which makes it mandatory for her to encourage her citizens to study French (more so as the language has been declared the country's second language), not much effort is put into the development of French. French language is not used in any official transactions. It neither functions as a language of bureaucracy, commerce or general medium of communication. Only a few members of the elite, particularly in the French departments in the academia or in the administrative cadre of French-owned companies communicate in French.

Similarly, most secondary school principals do not give priority to the teaching of French. This leads to non-production of candidates as feeders to colleges of education. In addition, with the advent of new technologies and especially ICT, most students, with the encouragement of their parents, get oriented towards the sciences while they neglect French.

2. **Shortage of Qualified Teachers:** Many of our secondary schools are lacking in competent and qualified teachers of French, even when the authorities show interest in the language. This dearth of teachers often leads to the cancellation of French in the school curriculum. Some lucky schools that manage to get teachers are not able to go beyond J.S.S.2 or 3; and so, there is a progressive reduction in the number of candidates offering French at S.S.C.E

level that could serve as feeder for colleges of education.

3. **Lack of Well-equipped Language Laboratories:** As French is taught as a foreign language (FLE), there is limited avenue for speaking the language outside the classroom. This calls for intensive drill in the use of the language. Unfortunately, the most essential infrastructure for this exercise – the language laboratory – is lacking in most schools. And where there is some provision, it is always grossly inadequate and not provided with ICT facilities that make teaching and learning pleasurable. The incidence of power outage or lack of electricity as well as the absence of technicians also compounds the problem where these facilities are available.

4. **Nigeria's Peculiar Linguistic Situation:** Nigeria is a multi-ethnic country with over 500 languages. Each tribe, especially the three major ones (Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba) have, over the years, been engaged in linguistic rivalry which has made it impossible to adopt any one of them as a national language. This is why the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria had cleverly avoided commitment to any of them through an open-ended clause that gives no time frame for the adoption of a national language:

The business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English, and in Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba **when adequate arrangement has been made...**

With this scenario, English remains the unrivalled official language of the country. It then becomes preposterous to add another language (a foreign one for that matter) to the contentious issue; and this is why the constitution is silent on the status of French, notwithstanding the pronouncement of the

National Policy on Education regarding the language. This vague position of French in the linguistic terrain of Nigeria is responsible for the non-preference of the language among students. The language therefore has to contend with both English and the indigenous languages, with the result that it is relegated to the status of elective subject.

5. Unfavourable Admission Policy: The greatest challenge being faced by Colleges of Education is the stringent requirement for French studies in colleges of education. In the past, the Pre-NCE programme used to serve as feeder for the mainstream NCE programme. Then, students were given accelerated coaching in French before they proceeded to NCE without necessarily possessing 'O' level in French or sitting for UTME. Today, the reverse is the case. According to the National Commission for Colleges of Education (2012) minimum standard for admission for French studies, students are required to possess five 'O' level papers at credit level in French as well as in English and Mathematics. They are also required to reach the cut-off mark in the UTME and Post-UTME. This stringent condition scares prospective students of French away. Viewed against the backdrop of the fact that very few secondary schools produce students of French at SSCE level to feed colleges of education, eligibility to study French is virtually an impossibility, hence the fast dwindling rate of student enrolment for French studies in these institutions. The example of Adeyemi College of Education is a case in point. In the 2014/2015 session, the total student population in the NCE programme stood at a ridiculous 8. The tough admission requirement is thus like the death knell for French studies in colleges of education.

Improving the Prospects for French studies in Nigerian Colleges of Education

It does appear that the prospects for French studies in Nigeria colleges of education are slim, but the fortunes of the language are still bright if, and only if some strategies are put in place. In the first place, there must be a change of attitude towards French on the part of government officials, schools administrators and the general public. The current apathy towards the language is as a result of lack of realization of the importance of the language in world politics. People must understand that the possession of a foreign language such as French enhances one's employment potentials, whatever one's profession. In other words, the ability to communicate in French increases one's chances of securing well-paid jobs not only as school teachers and lecturers within the country, but also as technocrats in foreign companies and international organizations such as the World Health organization, UNICEF, OPEC and so on. Government must therefore deploy its information parastatals to embark on a massive awareness campaign on the prospects of French studies, placing emphasis on the career opportunities.

In addition, in line with the spirit of the provision of the National Policy on Education, the French language must be made truly Nigeria's second official language. To this end, government must direct that French be used alongside the English language in all official communications. All official information dissemination must henceforth be also done in French. This will not only stimulate interest in the language but also fast-track its use in formal and non-formal inter-personal relationships.

In order to make French available as a school subject and as general tool of communication, all unemployed but qualified teachers of French must be employed. This will ensure provision of candidates at SSCE level to feed the colleges of education. And as a way of ensuring competence in the use of the French

language, there must be well-equipped language laboratories in all schools.

As regards the peculiar linguistic situation in Nigeria, it is clear that none of the indigenous languages can emerge as a national language within the foreseeable future. French can therefore easily be a good alternative. Nigeria must therefore revisit its language policy. To this end, French should no longer be Non-vocational Elective at the Senior Secondary level. It should be made compulsory at all levels. This will speed up the rate at which Nigerians acquire the language.

Finally, the National Commission for Colleges of Education must relax the admission requirements for French studies. In order to attract more students to study the language, it is necessary to revert to the status quo ante. In other words, just as it was the case before, candidates should no longer be required to sit for UTME after the Pre-NCE programme or possess 'O' level in Mathematics in order to be eligible to study French.

Conclusion

In this paper, the writers have taken a cursory look at the history and devolvement of French studies in Nigeria and in Colleges of Education in particular. They have noted that after a brief period of flourishing, the language started to flounder and diminish in status and stature on the Nigerian linguistic terrain while enrolment of candidates for the subject in colleges of education continues to dwindle. Finally, the paper gives suggestions on how French can be made to occupy a pride of place in the social and educational development of the country.

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