

RELEVANCE OF FRENCH LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN MANPOWER DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

French language considered as one of the very popular instruments of communication in the world, occupies a strategic place in West Africa as a powerful foreign language of the ECOWAS states. If these regional countries are to realize the benefits of modern science and technology, there is great need to embrace French language more firmly since it has a lot to do in terms of educational and manpower development of Nigeria. The subject matter of our study is the relevance of French language education to national manpower development. This paper highlighted the origin of the language, its historical background in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular. It then examined the teaching of French in the country and in the process, identified certain problems affecting it. The paper concluded with some recommendations for the teaching and learning of French.

Introduction

French is the language used by French people both in France and in all Franco-philic countries of the world. According to Ojo (2001), "It owes its origin to France which formally adopted it as her official language in 1539 (through the special linguistic decree referred to as Ordinance Villers-Cotterets passed by François I^{er})". French is a very popular language and it is learnt and used by a lot of people even in non-Franco-philic nations. Ojo further stressed that "French is the international world language after English, Spanish, Arabic and Portuguese in terms of the number of its speakers who are found in all the five continents".

Historically, the French language found its way to Africa following the advent of French colonial masters just like English language got in through their English speaking counterparts, on arrival, these French colonialists succeeded in capturing some territories on which their tough administrative system known as assimilation was imposed. The system demanded that an African should become a completely transformed individual, that is, an African turned French in every ramification except his skin that could not be changed. Ability to speak French language was therefore a symbol of freedom from the ill-treatment being experienced by Africans. On this, Ash: (2003) maintains that "The French language was clearly put out as the lifebuoy of Africans who would wish to escape the degrading rigours of French administration especially the "indigent" set of practices and attain the benevolent status of the "assimile"

The French language got to Nigeria by being introduced into the school curriculum as subject area. According to David (1975), this development was traceable to a recommendation offered in 1961 in Yaounde by a group of expert policy-makers on language teaching. It was a strong move to allow the co-existence of English and French languages in Africa. David pointed out that the O.A.U. (1963) approved the policy in Addis Ababa as a result of which French-English bi-lingualism advocated for all Africans. Based on the policy's approval by O.A. U. (now African Union (A.U.)), may be said that French language in Nigeria dates as far back as the 1960s.

French language education simply refers to the training acquired in French as an aspect of human field of study. Manpower development on the other hand, is the training or equipping of people with knowledge and skills necessary for effecting positive change in the society. Bedan (1995) believes that it is human resources that bring about development in the society and for such human resources to be proficient, there is very need to first undergo sound professional orientation training.

French Education and Manpower Development

At this juncture, it would be necessary to discuss French education from the perspective of its relevance to manpower development in a developing country like Nigeria.

French is a diplomatic language. According to Castle (1965) and Mbouka (2001) it is a major medium of communication of international organizations such as African Union (A.U.), Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (O.P.E.C.) and Economic Community of West African States (E.C.O.W.A.S) to mention a few. Nigeria is a member of all these international bodies which are made up of both Anglophone and Francophone countries. Therefore, for Nigeria to play any effective

role both politically and economically, good knowledge of not only English but also French is basic. For instance, on E.C.O.W.A.S. in particular, Mbouka (2001) opined that:

D'ailleurs, pour établir un meilleur rapport économique avec ses voisins de la CEDEAO et pour échanger facilement des produits, le Nigeria a besoin du Français. Étant donné que neuf parmi les seize États-membres de cette organisation sont francophones, une connaissance de la langue française est donc nécessaire.

This is translated into English as follows:

Besides, in order to establish a better economic relationship with her neighboring ECOWAS states and to easily exchange produce, Nigeria needs French. Given that nine out of sixteen member States of this organization are Francophone, knowledge of French language is therefore necessary.

Also, French is obviously a notable language of world transportation system. Thus, Nigeria's commercial enterprise such as network of modern transportation like marine and aviation will obviously thrive more rapidly when practical knowledge of English and French languages are developed. Similarly, no nation is all-sufficient and Nigeria is not an exception. That is why it has business transactions with other nations. For example, France is one of the biggest trading partners of Nigeria. It has established many French business ventures jointly shared by Nigeria, some of these are Michelin Company, Peugeot Association of Nigeria, Berliet-Saviem Nigeria Ltd, French bank known as Societe Generale Banque, etc. Nigerians with proper understanding of French language can be engaged in such companies and even in the process, gain a lot of expert knowledge for the good of the country. To buttress this point, Ojo (2001) says:

With about 150 French companies operating in Nigeria and in almost every facet of the country's economy, the knowledge of French and ability to effectively use it by Nigerians would open to them ample job opportunities in these companies-..

Given that Nigerians with knowledge of French can meaningfully contribute to the advancement of the country by serving in French-oriented business establishments, I feel it is worthwhile stepping up effort in the teaching and learning of the language. Moreover, French is a principal language of science and technology as Mbouka (2001) maintains and according to him, it is a main medium of instruction. So, if Nigeria would want to advance technologically and even try to catch up with developed nations like America, France, Japan, Britain, etc, then it has to embrace French education.

Again, French language education is of relevance to the nation since it will obviously help to tackle manpower needs in institutions of learning with special reference to French subject. French teachers are hard to come by especially in the rural areas. One pathetic thing as observed by Mbouka (2001) is that students are given a French teacher this year, after the next one or two years, that very teacher finds himself taking another subject altogether probably because of inability to cope with increasing work load in French. When this is the case, our children, who may be interested in French, end up abandoning it, having regarded themselves as the Biblical sheep without a shepherd. This is one strong reason why serious attention should be given to the teaching of French now. I feel this is very necessary because it is hoped that some of the learners under today's teachers will in turn become teachers over tomorrow's learners.

To say more, it should be pointed out that French to some extent, serves as a bridge to the attainment of full professional expertise in certain fields of study which Nigeria cannot do without. In higher institutions like the Polytechnics and Universities, fields of study including Law, Hotel

Management and Journalism among others require French as an auxiliary subject. This is because a basic knowledge of the language will enhance students' proper comprehension of texts with French terms. On this Mbouka (2001) again says:

Et si T on poursuit jusqu'au niveau univerritaire des etudes telles que le journalism, le mddecine ou les letters, on pourra etre oblige d'apprendre le Francais cornme matiere auxiliaire. Pour pouvoir lire des texts el journaux cents en francais au cours dc ses etudes, la connaissance du francais devicnt done un atom.*.

This translated into English is:

And if one pursues up to University level studies such as Journalism, Medicine or Arts, one can be forced to learn French as elective. To be able to read texts and papers written in French in the course of one's studies, the knowledge of French is therefore an asset.*

By implication then, one can say that French education plays both direct and indirect roles in national manpower development; direct in the sense that it is instrumental (o the production of professionals in French field of study itself, and indirect in the sense that it acts as a stepping stone to the production of professionals in certain other fields as earlier explained above. It is needless to say then that French is a valuable asset in Nigeria and its education needs to be highly encouraged.

Furthermore, French language education serves as a means by which some of its professionals are fast gaining entrance into the Nigerian field of authorship. It is interesting to know that books like Coomon Errors in French grammar, L'Etonnante Enfance D'Inotan, A Comprehensive Revision Handbook of French Grammar, La Calabasse Cassee to mention a few have been written by Nigerians. Books such as these are expected to be of great interest especially for the fact that they are produced by Nigerians who have first hand knowledge of our socio-political and cultural background. In a nutshell, French education is of great importance to our manpower development from the point of view of producing Nigeria - oriented instructional tools.

It does not go without saying that French language education has a lot of bearing with our country's diplomatic relations especially with Francophone nations. Nigeria's foreign embassies in places like France, Togo, Senegal, Benin among others require good knowledge of French in order for effective communication. Key international representatives such as ambassadors should have communicative ability in French. Where this is not the case, other Nigerians who possess the attribute are expected to act as interpreters.

Equally, French education is a means of opening a window into the outside world. It offers French students a basic knowledge of the idea and culture of French people. Such students are potential assets at international level. They can also serve within the nation in areas such as administration, immigration and customs and excise etc.

Mention should also be made that French is already recognized by Nigeria as a language of mass media, taking into consideration the case of Voice of Nigeria tagged in French "La Voix du Nigeria". This arm of Federal Radio Co-operation has made adequate provision for broadcast in French language in addition to English. This helps to project our country's image especially at the international level. Since it will not tell good on Nigeria to bring in foreign broadcasters, Nigerians have to receive French language training so as to care for the manpower need in this direction.

French in Nigeria Today

French language has been in existence for over three decades in Nigeria. In the past, some Nigerians with wrong notion about French under-rated it. Today however, many have seen the rationale behind its full integration into educational programmes. Already, Nigeria has on a serious note elevated French in the country. This is confirmed by N.C.C.E. (2003) as follows:

The Department of French in Colleges of Education is specially set up to produce high quality teachers of French in primary and secondary schools. This is essential in view of the fundamental policy decision of the Federal Government making French the second official language in Nigeria as well as giving it a status of core subject in both JS and SS curricula.

It is heart-thrilling to note that a considerable progress has been made in the teaching and learning of French in Nigeria. However, the rate of progress seems to be slow owing to certain problems.

Factors Militating Against the Teaching of French Language in Nigeria Include: Lack of Interest

According to Mbouka (2001), in some states, governments do not seem to show enough interest in the teaching of French in schools. There is neither recruitment of French teachers nor is there provision of necessary instructional materials to stimulate students. He maintains:

En ce qui concerne les réalités administratives, les Ministères de l'Éducation de certains états manifestent une totale indifférence par leur refus de recruter pour leurs écoles les professeurs de français qualifiés et de fournir aux écoles du matériel pédagogique-nécessaire.

That is: "As regards administrative realities, Ministries of Education of certain states show total indifference by their refusal to recruit for their schools qualified French teachers and to provide for schools necessary instructional materials".

Lack of Teachers' Motivation

Another problem as observed by Mbouka is lack of teachers' motivation. From personal experience, I believe that people undertake their task with greater zeal and exhibit more sense of determination for higher productivity when they enjoy necessary incentives that quench their thirst. In other words, good things need to be done and they can be done faster and more successfully when the doer finds himself in a conducive working atmosphere. Unfortunately however, in Nigeria, as Mbouka opined, much is expected from teachers with their conditions of service inadequately addressed. It is little wonder then that they (French teachers inclusive) try to abandon their profession in search of greener pasture.

Impression that French is not Important

According to Mbouka still, in some of our post-primary schools, the authorities try to create the impression that French is not important. This they do by allotting only few hours to the subject or by re-assigning French teachers to a related subject area like English.

Parental Influence

Moreover, parental influence on their children's choice of career as observed by the same above quoted author, is equally responsible for the slow progress being made in French education in the country. According to him, some people try to impress in the mind of children that rather than studying French which is a mere foreign language, subjects such as Engineering, Medicine, Law or Banking among others should be pursued. Little do they know that some of these much desired fields require certain degree of French knowledge as has already been pointed out in this paper.

Conclusion

As seen from our discussion, it has clearly been established that French language education truly occupies a strategic position in the equipment of many Nigerians with professional skills necessary to make them functional towards positive contributions to national advancement. For Nigeria to maintain her present position as a towering political and economic giant of African continent and in fact, for her to strive to cross over from the status of a third world country to that of the developed and to be one day ranked among the great nations of the world, it cannot just do without both qualitative and quantitative manpower. It is exactly towards this direction that French language education has made and is still making contribution. This being the case therefore, it can rightly be reiterated that French education is indeed relevant to manpower development in the country.

Recommendations

- i) Federal government should go another length to work towards making French compulsory at post-primary school level in no distant future, ii) Language teachers (including French teachers) should be adequately motivated in the true sense of the word.
- lii) There is need to place emphasis on pragmatic, teaching strategies to ease comprehension, iv) Government should re-consider the issue of sponsoring Colleges of Education and University students during immersion programme in Francophone countries or Nigerian French Village.

Badagry. v) Various State Ministries of Education should show more interest in French by recruiting teachers into the field periodically as is applicable to other fields of study in order to ensure continuity of learning.

vi) Regular workshops should be organized for French teachers to help refresh them, vii) Government should see to it that practical rather than nominal career or guidance services exist in all post-primary schools for proper orientation of children towards subject choice at final examinations, viii) Activities like essay competitions, inter-school quiz and debating programmes should be made compulsory for all French students, ix) National Commission for Colleges of Education should re-examine her approval of subject combination with French.

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