

THE IMPERATIVE OF FRENCH LANGUAGE EDUCATION FOR SELF EMPLOYMENT AND PRODUCTIVITY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Language education has been greatly considered in Nigeria as the basic tool of national integration towards productivity and development. The reason is that language teaching is regarded as a great investment to produce quality of human resources needed for productivity and development. Unfortunately, language teaching in Nigeria has witnessed myriads of problems. These include, neglect, poor funding and facilities, inadequate teachers and teaching materials, etc. Thus this paper is set to examine the concept of language and education, employment and challenges of French language teaching in Nigeria.

The advancement of an individual, community and the larger society is predicated on education. It serves as a pivot of any nation and the pillar of its development (Salihu, 2007). It is an undeniable fact that education is the only solution to complex social problems (Ahmadu, 1994). Thus, it is against this backdrop that United Nations declared education as a right to every school age child (Rufai, 2004) cited in (Salihu, 2007). This leads us to the very pertinent question; what is education?

Education has been defined as the aggregate of all process by which a child develops his ability and other forms of behaviours that are of positive value to the society (Fafunwa, 1974). In other words, it is the acquisition of beneficial knowledge, attitude and skills aimed at solving personal and societal problems (Maiwada, 2003). Kayode, (2004) described education as a process of adjustment, a means of developing social efficiency... reconstruction of experience and a process of change. From the foregoing, one can infer that education is meant for the development of individual and the society at large as it provides necessary ingredients for solving societal problems. Thus it is seen as an institution for enhancing national cohesion, productivity and development.

The Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004) in the National Policy on Education (NPE) (2004) describes education as a dynamic and most important instrument of change because no fundamental change in the intellectual and social domain of any society can be achieved without education. Generally education has the task of nurturing the advancement of the individual, community and society.

The Concept of Language

Francis, (2004) in Kola and Ademola, (2004) describes language as a vehicle of culture and experience; a store of value that provides for us a different way of perceiving the world in addition to empowering us to think objectively.

Kraus (1992) cited by Francis (2004) saw language as a supreme achievement of uniquely collective genius. Francis believes that language is encyclopedia of knowledge of the cultural life of a people, their philosophy, literature, habitat and verbal arts.

Sharing the same view, Egonu (1988) described language as arbitrary code of symbols by which people interact and cooperate. It is used to identify individuals and groups. Thus in Nigeria, for example areas and their inhabitants are identified as Igbo speaking, Hausa speaking, Yoruba speaking, etc. He argued that a people develop a language as their medium for transmission of knowledge, cultural values and articulation of their world view. Adejo (2002) corroborated this assertion when he defines language as an instrument for communication, a symbol of social identity and emblem of group membership and solidarity. Language is not just a medium of communication but a symbol of identity; it constitutes the distinct element that differentiates people. Each language represents the

community in which it evolves. Every language is capable of enriching its vocabularies and structures as a result of its contact with another culture by forming new expression from the existing language through coining, code switching, etc. hence it's capable of coping with new realities and serve in Arts, Science and technology.

The Peculiarity of the French Language

The importance of the French language as a tool for meeting transformation agenda in Nigeria cannot be over emphasized. According to Ajiboye, (2002) the French language and the contemporary Nigerian society are inseparable as the modern world sees it as one of the languages upon which civilization depends.

This assertion is crucial because it seems the right place to bring to fore the radiance of French language and why it is preferred to other world languages in this century as an instrument for national development. French is a language of precision; it was the language of European aristocracy and world diplomacy. Ajiboye, (2002) argued that speaking French in the 18th and 19th century was considered a symbol of intellectual soundness, lucidity, nobility of mind, grace and culture.

We share in this thought that the prestigious nature of the French language is no doubt evident today in this age; the importance of French language cannot but be neglected only at the peril of any such country. Akintayo, (2009) observed that most literary, scientific and technological developments in Europe were traced to France.

Many French philosophers and scientists constitute important land mark in the history of human development. To be specific, the contributions of Ambrose Pare were very remarkable in the areas of medicine. We have philosophers like Descartes who was known as initiator of modern scientific thought. Pascal, a philosopher, mathematician and doctor invented integral calculation and probability in mathematics.

Furthermore, French is the language of culture that unlocks the doors of arts, music, fashion, cuisine, etc. French is also the language of many great literary masterpieces. Ajiboye, (1989) observed that African continent is the host of largest French colonies in the world because it is on the continent of Africa that are concentrated the largest area and the largest Francophone population outside Europe. He asserted that French language has been playing a crucial role in the economic lives of most of the African countries.

Battye and Hintze (1997) posited that out of 171 independent countries and 14 colonies in the world, about 60% of them speak and use French. In addition, Adejo, (1996) stated that French language does not belong to France alone; it is a world language, spoken in countries around the world in Africa, Asia, America, Europe and the Middle East.

The French language is the language with the 2nd largest number of speakers in the European Union. This is important because the decisions of the EU affect directly or indirectly the developing countries including Nigeria. It is a key language that is used in many international organizations to which Nigeria belongs. It is a sine-qua-non for employment in the United Nations and it serves as indispensable medium of communication for official transaction within the organization.

Employment Challenges in Nigeria

Nigeria has serious employment problems, many graduates of its high institutions cannot find jobs. Despite the average economic growth rate of about seven percent per annum over the last seven years, a good performance by about thirty percent according to a recent World Bank Publication. Akanmu, (2011) posited that Nigeria has serious jobless growth problem. Its strong economic growth does not translate to jobs and real life opportunities for its teeming youth population. Three out of ten graduates of high education find work. Being highly educated does not increase the chances of finding jobs. Many graduates of high education who find jobs are not gainfully employed. They are forced to accept marginal jobs that do not use their qualifications in trades, sales, agriculture and manual

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labour. For those who are opportune to find jobs, employers are concerned about their skills with their job requirements. Standards have fallen in high education due to poor funding leading to growing preference for oversea university education.

Employers want their graduate recruits to be competent in their chosen fields. They also want to come out of schools that are well equipped with complementary skills such as problem solving, of reflective and critical thinking, interpersonal and team skills, effective communication, character, integrity and high level of personal ethics, self esteem, self discipline, organizing skills and abilities to translate ideas to action. The problem is that these life skills are rarely taught as part of high education curriculum. Yet as soft as they are, they are not less important in making success out of school leavers as the specific technical skills in a graduate's chosen field.

There are critical policy issues to address in enhancing employment and productivity. The first is how to increase the employment generation capacity of the economy, create jobs that will absorb thousands of higher education graduates and reverse the current pattern of Nigeria's jobless economic growth. The second policy issue to address is how higher education can produce graduates that are employable for the jobs created. How would Nigeria's high education institutions improve standards to produce graduates with sufficient technical skills in their fields? This is critical given the historical under funding of higher education in Nigeria in the last two decades. Her national spending needs to be re-ordered to allocate more resources to human capacity development which has high leverage on its social and economic development. In addition, Nigerian higher education policy must also address how its institutions will develop the complementary curriculum that addresses the life skills requirements, for her graduates and prepare them for postgraduate life journey.

French Language in Employment and Productivity

Language, as it is well known, is used according to the demands of varying situations. Oftentimes an individual possesses all the variations, so much that he uses a particular variety for a particular purpose, and another variety for another purpose. In the same way Obanyo (2000) posited that all Nigerians need French language but with variation. He divided Nigeria in four groups and the kind of French each group needs. His first group is made up of primary school pupils in junior secondary schools. He said that French should be made compulsory at this level. The second group constitutes senior secondary school students. He suggested that at this level, students should be carefully selected and given thorough drilling in the language to prepare them for higher French studies. His next group is made up of students in the tertiary institutions, including universities where they specialize. His fourth group is made up of those who would learn French as the situations in their workplaces require.

It is imperative to note that the choice and allocation of language to specific purpose must have to depend on the communicative needs for the language. These needs fall into three tiers: local, national and international and French falls under the international tier. Gundu, (1986) argued that Nigeria will have to do a review of French programs that currently exist in our education institutions so that it will be more useful to her needs.

In agreement to Gundu, this paper is of the opinion that Nigerians need more technical French other than the kind of French that is currently taught in our schools. We need utilitarian French that will enable Nigerians function properly in different domains such as trade, customs, immigration, banking and finance, industry, agriculture, transport, telecommunication, etc. each of these domain has its vocabulary and structure that need to be learnt. The current situation in which emphasis seems to be laid on literary French of the Voltaires, the Hugos, the Rousseaus, the Corneilles, the Baudelaires, etc. does not equip Nigerians to function effectively. It is ridiculous to find custom and immigration officers who are unable to communicate in French. These are services that have direct dealings with our francophone neighbours.

Practical steps should be taken to reposition the status and quality of French in our education institutions in order to provide the kind of French needed for human capacity development. In secondary school curriculum, French should be made a compulsory vocational elective thereby placing it in the category of subjects that will rouse the interest of talented and intelligent students as this is the level where pupils select subjects that determine their future career. At the university level French curriculum should be reviewed so as to forge a more purposeful, employment driven and functional French. The studies of French in the military, the customs, immigration and the state security services should be taken seriously. The same thing applies to officers in the foreign affairs ministry. More graduates of French should be employed in these services.

This paper proposes the introduction of degree program like French/International Studies, French/Mass- communication, French/Economics, French/Administration, French/Secretariat Studies, French/business Studies, etc. to replace the current literary degree program in French in which students spend the whole four- year -academic program studying literature and civilization. Out of school graduates of French need retraining before they can function in domains such as trade, administration, banking and finance, etc. as the national development goal is to eliminate waste and inefficiency, and provide infrastructure and social services; we should produce the desired French.

This paper is not complete without discussing some factors besetting the teaching and learning of French language in Nigeria.

Policy Deficiency The sub-section of the policy on education that provides for French language as a non vocational elective at secondary school lacks the necessary impetus needed to facilitate the learner's performance. This sudden cut off affects the language learning.

Problem of Teachers The quality of teachers that teach the language is another factor that militates against French productivity. Some of the teachers lack the necessary teaching qualification and few of them who are trained with NCE, B.ED or BA.ED lack communicative competence in the language.

-Attitudinal Problem The attitude of some Nigerians especially parents in the north see the language as another western imposition capable of creating linguistic confusion and that it does not lead to wider scope of career except the teaching profession. The attitude of the policy makers towards the implementation of its policy is equally discouraging.

Poor Funding Most of the institutions where the language is taught are under funded. As a result, the necessary materials and facilities for teaching the language are not available. The laboratories are under equipped, there is no access to internet services and uninterrupted power supply to watch and listen to French programs.

Conclusion

The French language has been given a theoretical recognition in the national language policy which does not translate to practical reality because it continues to suffer especially in the senior secondary schools. There is therefore the need for practical action devoid of all political and religious considerations because French is a language and should not be subjected to unnecessary scrutiny. The French language is highly important for all round development in Nigeria. Therefore it is imperative for the government to facilitate its development for a progressive productivity.

Curriculum Problem The course combination offered in Nigerian Colleges of Education creates a divided attention in the learner and can degenerate into confusion of purpose. Furthermore, the current situation in the degree program where emphasis is on literature and civilization does not equip learners to function effectively in the language.

Recommendations

To ensure functional French that will enhance self employment and productivity in Nigeria the paper recommends the following measures.

French language should be made compulsory up to senior secondary school level in order to sustain and perfect its learning progression. It must also feature at least 3 times a week in the school time-table as time input determines the output.

The French language curriculum in the tertiary institutions should be redirected and emphasis should be laid on productive technical and vocational French in order to make it relevant for employment in all sectors of the economy.

There should be proper education and re-orientation of Nigerians on the need to encourage the learning of French language at all levels and across disciplines.

Government should equip the French language laboratories with modern learning aids such as internet facilities, computers, audio- visual materials, etc.

Seasonal training and retraining of French teachers in quality and quantity should be given a priority because not only is there lack of teachers but the quality leaves much to be desired.

Teachers should be aware of new methodologies and keep abreast with modern technologies that will enhance their teaching abilities.

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