

# FRENCH LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA: VISION AND MISSION IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

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## **Abstract**

The multilingual nature of Nigeria poses a problem to the promotion of a common language in the country. Due to ethnic rivalry and political sensitivity of language, government is indifferent about any move towards the adoption/promotion of a common language, be it indigenous or foreign. English thrives because of factors surrounding its introduction into the country. Apart from being imposed *by* the imperialists, it was the medium of formal education, which guaranteed economic mobility; also, it became a communication bridge that linked up various ethnic groups in the country. In the case of French, we consider it a blurred vision and a mission impossible struggling to achieve status equality with English because those factors that favoured English are here absent, resulting in weak motivation. This paper offers what should be the vision of foreign language teaching in Nigeria in the 21st century and the mission of foreign language such as French in a non-francophone environment like Nigeria. Challenges are identified and possible solutions suggested.

## **Introduction**

From research facts, we can split French language development in Nigeria into three phases. The first phase can be dated back to the 19th century as documented by Omolewa (1981), in Ojelade (1999:13). During this period, it was individual decision that motivated the quest to acquire competence in foreign languages such as French. Since it was the Britons that colonized Nigeria, there was no government policy in favour of French in the territory. Thus, to those Africans who on their own engaged in the study of this language, benefits were among others, access to communication in newspapers, books, and academic mobility.

As proprietors of schools saw the interest- in non-francophone Africans to study French, they gradually introduced it into the school programme. This phase ended in 1882 according to Ojo (1992), in Ojelade (1999:133), following the enactment of a British law forbidding the teaching of other European languages except English in schools and colleges through out the British colonies.

The second phase of French in Nigeria can be said., to begin in 1909 and closed in 1995. During this period, French was reintroduced into Nigeria despite the 1882 law forbidding it and was only being facilitated by missionary schools. After independence in 1960, the Nigerian government adopted it as a subject of study in public schools on the ground that Nigeria needed to foster cooperation and understanding with her francophone neighbours on the one hand and to facilitate communication with France and other French speaking countries of the world on the other hand, as documented by Brann (1988).

The third phase of French in Nigeria began in 1996 following the vision of the late General Sanni Abacha. The then head of state looked at French beyond being a medium that will facilitate communication between two or more countries but as a medium of communication between the multi-various ethnic groups in the country. Thus bilingualism becomes the mission of French as conceived by Sanni Abacha. It is not my intension here to analyze what will be or are the gains of bilingualism. Instead, this paper looks at how grounds are being prepared for the realization of this objective. Is it achievable or mere speculation?.

## **Linguistic Politics and Policy in Nigeria: To Favour Bilingualism or Not**

As observed by Ansa (2003:1), various dichotomies today exist in Nigeria which is derivable from linguistic factors. Given that Nigeria is a multilingual and multitribal nation, the issue of who dominates who becomes a factor in language development. This factor and the conflicting interest that goes with it is what is here referred to as linguistic politics. This has rendered the idea or effort of developing a language that traverses cultural divides problematic. The fact that today, English language stands out as the only language that enjoys the status of a common language in Nigeria is

because the colonialists imposed it as the only accepted official language; the colonized also saw in it a medium of inter-comprehension among the autonomous tribes in the country. Thus, it tactically became a political tool used in checkmating the imposition of a language of one ethnic group on the other.

This claim is supported by Essien (1981), in Ansa (2003:347), as he observed that "even the English language (in Nigeria) is not politically neutral". Therefore, since English poses no political threat to any of the tribes in the country, Nigerians see no need bothering themselves with any other foreign language.

Apart from the negative effect of the political neutrality of French on the spread of this language in the country, the politics of policy making present Nigeria as unsafe water for French to swim. Before we go on, let us pause and consider what policy in itself is. Essien (2003:24), opines that policy provides a rationale or a principled basis for action, plan, or otherwise for an organization or part of it, in the overall interest of the organization. Having stated the role it plays in an organization, Essien (1998), defines policy as:

Broad, general, principles, ideas, guidelines, objectives and stipulations or provision laid down by an authority for the running of an organization. Therefore, language policy according as defined in [www.goggle.com](http://www.goggle.com) is:

What government does officially through legislature, court decisions, executive actions, or other means to (a) determines how languages are used in public context (b) cultivate language skills needed to meet natural priorities (c) establish the right of individuals or groups to learn, use, and maintain languages,

Having known what language policy is, what then is the Nigeria language policy and how will it provoke bilingualism?

There are certain legal instruments in Nigeria that serve as language policies. The 1979 and 1999 constitutions are good example of such legal instruments. These constitutions maintain that the business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in the three major languages of the country while English is up hold as the lingua franca of the country. Also, The National Policy on Education provides that children be taught in their mother tongue in the primary school during the first three years with English as a subject of study, while in the last three years of primary education, English takes over as medium of instruction. This policy does not in anywhere support or encourage the teaching/learning of French in the Nigerian school system.

Even after the Late Sanni Abacha advocated for bilingualism, it is unfortunate to note that there has been no government policy to back this up, therefore, if teachers of French language in Nigeria in the 21st century still consider bilingualism as the objective of teaching French language in Nigeria, they may soon run out of relevance. If the government of Nigeria is sincere about making Nigeria a bilingual nation, then there should by now be an action plan on how to achieve this. Since there is none, we can rightly say that the issue of bilingualism vanished with the Late Sanni Abacha.

### **A Survey of Language Policy in Some Countries of the World**

If one should consider trends in global economy, the influence of international policy on internal economy, the level of technological advancement which is fast in braking cultural blocks thereby reducing the world to something smaller than a village, then absence of such language plan and policy that encourages the acquisition of other's language will result in alienation and stagnation. With this awareness, the United State Government spends more than 1.5 billion dollars each year to support various forms of language education while Japanese government makes it mandatory for Japanese youth to study English for 3 years in Junior high school, 3 years in senior high school and at least 2 years at the university level . Canada is one country among others that have keen interest in bilingualism. To achieve and maintain this, the Canadian Government in 1969 passed the first official languages Act. This was renewed in 2003 due to budget-cut in the last decade. At the moment, the Canadian Government has repackaged her education system such that one out of every two young Canadians speaks both English and French in ten years. This is hoped to be achieved through a policy that will provoke students' enrollment in French schools outside Quebec from 68% to 80% in ten years.

From this submission, it can be seen that bilingualism cannot be achieved through mere pronouncement by a country's head of state. It requires legally backed action plan. This is absent in the case of Nigeria while it becomes devastating for the French teachers who perhaps, have bilingualism as their vision, to see that after more than a decade of French in Nigeria, they cannot take this language beyond the classroom.

### **French in Nigeria: Vision and Mission in the 21<sup>ST</sup> Century.**

In the 21st century, what is important is not knowledge accumulation but wealth creation through acquired knowledge, thus education is perceived as an instrument of wealth creation and human development. In such a situation, what then should be the vision of foreign language educators and the mission of foreign language in Nigeria? Before we move further, let us look at the concept of vision and mission. According to Obani (1998:61),

Vision is a mental creation, a mental and intellectual perception of a desired end, situation, outcome, condition or environment that an individual or group, organization or system would deliberately wish to create and to see materialize.

While El-Namak, (1991), in Obani (1998), sees the concept as "a process of direction setting", it is our belief that there's something deeper than just communication which French seeks to achieve in Nigeria, therefore, it is left for the Nigerian government to identify this then, put in place a viable policy which will ensure its realization. Vision here, will treat "why" and on "what" anchors our zeal of teaching/learning French in Nigeria. Mission, on the other hand, is according to Obani (1998:61), a translation of ideas (which constitute vision), into pragmatic actualities.

The vision of French language studies in Nigeria in the 21st century should be the preparation/packaging of Nigerian graduates such that they become active players in the global economy. This calls for a shift from French for "social interaction" to French for professional development. In my own submission, we have stayed in one place for too long while the world is moving on a fast lane of development.

What do we mean by French for "social interaction"? From the first phase of French in Nigeria, objective was self expression and emotional communication but despite their literacy in French, can our graduates work with the language? Supposing a French literate Nigerian graduate is employed to work in the financial sector, is French for self expression all he needs to excel in his career? Won't he have problems understanding financial related terminologies in French? Or if legal or medical documents are given to our French graduates, how many of them can display dexterity in translating them? These therefore, constitute the challenges facing French language studies in Nigerian in the 21st century.

It is always as a result of negligence in potential exploration that one would assume a given state or level of attainment to be the best, there is always room for improvement. Therefore, in order that we level up with trends in the world, we should begin to research for possibility of having options open to our students that study French. Such options can be French in Economics/Business Administration, French in vocational Technology, French in Agricultural/Biological sciences, French in Legal studies, French in Engineering etc.

There are cases where a student would have loved to study this language but due to the course he or she chooses to study in the university or college, the student cannot study the language. I once had a student that just finished secondary school come to me and expressed her willingness to study French. I arranged classes for her; she later sat for JAMB examinations choosing Medicine/surgery as her discipline. As she was about leaving for school, she said Monsieur, "I would really like to continue with French if it will be offered in my department" she bought a lot of books on the language but when I met her later, she said Monsieur "I have forgotten all my French" This then made me wonder how bilingualism is hoped to be achieved.

Developing such academic programmes that are advocated for in this paper will make the language more relevant and meaningful to the Nigerian child. Beside this, motivation to study the

language will be boosted. John (2004:3), opined that "in learning a language motivation plays an important role". He further, stressed that where the learner is fully conscious of the need of the utilitarian purposes of a said language, the desire for learning the language will be maintained '.

Since mission is the translation of realities of vision into pragmatic realities, therefore, the mission of French in this era of globalization should be to prepare Nigerians, irrespective of their area of specialization to function competently in that same discipline in a foreign environment French will then function as a channel through which we market our human resources to the outside world.

### **Challenges Ahead**

This paper has already highlighted the challenges militating against the development of meaningful foreign language policy in Nigeria. In the case of bilingualism, there seems to be no government strategy which can ensure its realization. Beginning the study of French in the higher institution presents the language as an enforced language rather than acquired language.

In the case of French for professional development which is here considered to be the mission of the language and other Foreign languages (except English), in Nigeria, the challenges before the teachers of this language is to explore various fields of human endeavour using the French language as the searchlight. By so doing, professionalism can be developed and on the part of the students who engage in the study of the language, they will, apart from developing proficiency in the language, acquire professional knowledge in any chosen field.

### **Conclusion**

The thesis of this presentation is that in Nigeria, French is seated on a stool with shaky legs as there is no government policy providing a legal framework for the development of this language. Though much noise is being made about bilingualism, it is an illusion that may result in a state of frustration to the teachers of this language should they wholly rely on this to be the mission of French in Nigeria. Not that this cannot be achieved but from all indications, the government is not committed to this project. Therefore, to boost the relevance of French in the 21st century, this paper proposes French for professional development. If this is vigorously pursued, French will now serve as a channel through which we market our human resources to the outside world. This will position Nigerian graduates where they become active players in the global economy.

### **Recommendations**

In order to make French more relevant than it is at the moment and equally sustain its relevance the following steps are recommended

1. There is a need to move away from the grammar/literature approach to teaching French. Fields other than literature should be explored while French serves as the medium of instruction.
2. In the tertiary institutions, other departments should liaise with the French department to workout modalities on how to make the language accessible and relevant to their students' professional development.
3. The federal government should borrow a leaf from what is happening in other parts of the globe in terms of developing a viable language policy that will favour the teaching of French and other foreign languages in Nigeria.
4. The study of French should begin at the early stage of a child's academic training.

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