

## **From Constraints to Control: The French Language Classroom in Multilingual Nigeria**

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**ABSTRACT:** *There are several issues associated with the teaching and learning of French Language in an Anglophone environment like Nigeria. For effective `interaction with the neighbouring countries, Nigerian citizens need the knowledge of French language. Nigeria is an Anglophone country that is surrounded by francophone countries. French Language teachers face a lot of issues while carrying out their day to day activities in the classroom. Some of them include mother tongue interference, lack of use of instructional materials, challenges of the modern technological facilities, confusion of the target French Language, hostile environmental issues, psychological issues, teachers' personal issues and that of the learners etc. All these issues seem to affect the learning processes in the French Language classrooms. All the above constraints contribute to the poor performance of French language in Nigerian schools; this has led to poor academic achievement of students in French language which has spilled over to poor performance of students in both internal and external examinations.*

**KEYWORDS:** French Language, issues, knowledge, learning, teaching

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Language is a basic tool of communication in the world. Communication is the means by which we pass on from one person to another our ideas, our feelings our knowledge and our requests; indeed, every aspect of human life. Without communication; human existence today could have been chaotic. Before the western form of education and foreign religions were introduced into Nigeria, Nigerian languages have been in existence, for variety of purposes by the people. The various mother tongues have been used for communication amongst the peoples. Many of the languages have developed elaborate vocabularies for respect, honour, persuasion, threat and so on.

There are also innumerable greeting formulae in Nigeria languages which suit appropriate occasions.

These mother tongue knowledge and education were transmitted from one generation and one era to another. Since the languages were unwritten, the people depend on memory in order to store information. The oral literature and history developed such as: poems, chants songs, musical compositions and so on become an invaluable aspect of the people. Nigeria as an heterogeneous state have different ethnic groups with their language differences, but the three major indigenous languages in Nigeria are: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. Nigerians have the problem of accepting one of the three major languages as the national language, this makes it easy for the colonial masters to systematically impose their language that is; English on the whole country and this is why English is being use as our official language in Nigeria till date.

West African countries were taken over by two different “Warlords” in the name of colonization that is, Britain and France. The first took care of just four countries; Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone and Gambia while the latter took care of almost all the remaining countries. Each of the colonial masters planted their language in their colonies; this is in practice up till now in the name of “official languages”. This is why Nigeria is an Anglophone society today. However, all her neighbouring states are francophone countries; Niger is in the north, Cameroun in the east, Benin in the West. In as much as it is believed that no country can survive on his own without having any relationship with other countries. It is therefore difficult for Nigeria to exist in isolation. This is the reason why French language is therefore recommended for her cooperate existence. Araromi Olaseinde (2017) declares that, no state and nation of the world in our time, all itself advance its own development without regard to the outside world affairs. The cooperation of people in all sectors of human life has become a ‘sine qua non’ if the progress of mankind is to be promoted, mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence among the nations and people of the world are to be guaranteed. The country; Nigeria is confused about which language to adopt as the national language. This is why the position of the three main indigenous languages that is, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba is uncertain. According to Emenanjo (1998), Nigeria does not have an explicit national language policy, but she has made a number of explicit statements about language issues in the polity. Such statements can be found in the Federal Republic of Nigeria National Policy on Education (N.P.E 2004) revised edition.

French language was introduced into the countries education after the extinction of Latin language. The language was highly esteemed because the users were seen as prestigious; but today it seems the feelings are no longer the same. Nigeria as a nation or country is a place where diverse languages are spoken but belong to the English population that is surrounded by the French countries. Nigeria as an Anglophone country is surrounded by francophone countries: the Republic of Benin in the West, Niger Republic in the North, Chad Republic in the North-East and Cameroon in the East. All these countries have French as their official language. Consequently, for Nigerian

citizens to establish effective communication with their neighbouring countries it is important for them to learn their language. Ability to communicate in French language will help them to break the problem of language barrier which might occur during their interactions with the francophone neighbours in the light of this geographic location of Nigeria, the Nigerian government deems it necessary to integrate French language education in the country Policy on Education.

French language occupies a strategic position on the international scene today. It is a language of development, industry, trade and diplomacy. Language, Onah (2009) explains that French teacher's approaches must be students centred which will make the learners to have interest in the Language. Teaching has been greatly considered in Nigeria as the basic tool for national integration towards productivity and development. Language teaching is seen as a great investment to produce quality of human resources needed for productivity and development, but it seems language teaching in Nigeria is bisected with myriads of problems. These includes; poor funding, poor facilities, inadequate teachers, inadequate teaching aids such as Projectors, Computers, Laboratories and Libraries among others. In order to have smooth and productive communication and working relationship with the border countries, the Nigerian citizens ought to have a good knowledge of French language. Onyemelukwe (2004) opines that Nigeria is a country where diverse languages are spoken in the sea of francophone, and for this reason, the Nigerian citizens do not just need a good knowledge of French language to be able to relate and interact with the border countries but to be able to relate with the French world as a whole. Irrespective of the blind spots mentioned above, French language has still been given little attention in Nigeria; as students seemly see it as a difficult course or subject to be learnt and understood.

### **Origin of French Language in Nigeria**

The primary aim of introducing French in Nigeria was educational and cultural, but after the Yaoundé convention (1961) in which a recommendation was made that The Second European language should be considered not only as a means of communication between English speaking and the French speaking countries in Africa but also as an international language with a wider purpose which jointly with English as the first European language would enable Africa to communicate with other countries throughout the world. It was introduced as a secondary subject in Yaoundé Conference (1961). The conference recommended the introduction of teaching and learning of French and it was to be taught and examined as a school discipline in Anglophone Africa, including Nigeria. Every individual should learn how to read, write, understand and speak French language. Though, the language can be interpreted in other languages by interpreters or translated into other languages by translators, to pass across a message.

Thus, French language was adopted as a means of passing moral instruction to the entire world. Therefore, if Nigeria is to develop, there is the need for French Language to be made compulsory at least up to S.S.S level. Through French language; Nigeria is bound to progress socially,

economically, technologically, politically and culturally among other nations. For an individual to be current in the daily events of the nation, one needs a sound knowledge of French language. French language, through the mass media, has been able to contribute to the development of the nation by supplying various information to the entire world. The information based on social, educational, economic, technology and political is being supplied daily in French language, thereby allowing a common share of vital information throughout the whole world. This made Adesola (1990) submit that apart from literature books which expose the features of the French culture, the learners of French Language should extensively read information issues. The Role of French Language towards development of Nigeria drawn from French newspapers and magazines, and steadily listen to radio.

The importance of French language cannot be overemphasized. Even in sports, all the international sports competitions recognize the importance of French language, this is why commentaries cannot but be given in French language. Moreover, out of sixteen countries that constitute West African countries, only five speak English Language while the remaining countries speak French Language. This is why the international organisations such as United Nations, ECOWAS, O.A.U. and so on, use French language as a medium of reaching people in the world knowing fully well that those who speak French language in the globe are enormous, this enable them to gain from their wealth of experience of technology. If Nigerian government in her educational policy makes French language mandatory in our schools at all levels, it will gain tremendously from the technological advancement of the French people

### **Teaching of French Language in Nigeria**

Federal Government of Nigeria National Policy on Education (2004) state that, the place of French language education is well recognised. The policy states thus: Government appreciates the importance of language as a means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion, and preserving cultures. Thus every child shall learn the language of the immediate environment. Furthermore, in the interest of national unity it is expedient that every child be required to learn one of the three Nigerian languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. For smooth interaction with our neighbours, it is desirable for every Nigeria to speak French Language. Accordingly, French Language shall be the second official language in Nigeria and it shall be compulsory in Primary and Junior Secondary Schools but Non-vocational elective at the Senior Secondary School. Going by this pronouncement, one could identify the importance of French Language learning in Nigeria. It explains the recognition given to teaching and learning of French Language in the general education by a Nigerian learner.

Therefore, Joyce, Weil & Calhoun (2014) note that; French language teaching was introduced as a subject in the primary, secondary and higher education in the country. At the beginning, expatriates were brought into the country to teach the language in the Secondary Schools, Colleges of Education and Universities throughout the country. At that time, Nigerian French

students were sent to France for a year abroad in order to expose them to French language environment which give them opportunity to perfect their proficiency and competency in the language. The Government realized the cost of the year abroad programme, so they decided to establish the Nigerian French Language Village at Badagry which now serves as a language immersion centre for Nigerian learners of French in the Universities and Colleges of Education. Later, the French graduates produced by the Nigerian Universities and Colleges of Education were engaged to teach the language in the Secondary Schools across the nation.

### **French Language Productivity enhancement**

With the government declaration in the National Policy on Education on the importance of French Language, its teaching and learning witnessed another dimension. Some school principals, administrators, Provost, Rectors and Vice Chancellors in the country are already awake to the development. Some of these developments are:

- i. The language curriculum has been re-organised in the interest of teaching and learning of the language at the following levels. French language features in the following sectors: University, Polytechnic, College of Education and secondary School as well as primary school.
- ii. The Higher Institutions have been able to produce teachers to teach the language at the primary school, secondary school, colleges of education, and other tertiary institutions.
- iii. At the colleges of education and university levels, departments of French/European/Foreign Language studies carry out research on the way to enhance the teaching and learning of the language.
- iv. Government has been able to establish a French Language Village which serves as an immersion center for effective learning of the language.
- v. At the Junior Secondary Schools level the language is taught as a core-subject. Unfortunately it is a Non-vocational Elective at the Senior Secondary Schools.
- vi. Private organizations also contribute to this development as French language learning centres continue to spring up at different locations in the country.
- vii. The teaching and learning of the language now features in Television and radio programme in the country. There are examples of such programmes as “parlons Français” on Gateway television in Abeokuta on Thursdays and on Voice of Nigeria in Lagos.

In spite of these numerous testimonies, the teaching and learning of the language is bedeviled with inadequate teachers of French language and low interest in the language among Nigerian learners. The question someone who have keen interest will ask is that, with the pronouncement of the government on the importance of French language learning, and the level of the government's input for productivity in this area in terms of policy, structures and other things, why is there still a great gap on the output?

### **Issues in French Language Teaching in Nigeria**

Uguma & Apkama (2013) Agbor (2019) Timothy & Obiekezie (2019) states that most times, the Language teacher faces a lot of issues starting from learners problems to environmental issues. Nigerian Government started re-emphasising the teaching and learning of French Language. Despite the adoption of the language as a second official language, majority of the public Secondary Schools in the country are no more offering French as a subject.

### **Acute shortage of trained teachers**

In schools, students are no longer encouraged to learn the language because French teachers are no more employed and the already existing ones are made to teach other subjects like: English Language, Literature in English, Social Studies, Computer Science, Christian Religious Knowledge, Yoruba or any other subjects. As a result of the attitude of the Government, many teachers and parents see French language teaching and learning as waste of time. The Universities and Colleges of Education are no longer getting more enrollment of candidates to study French language as a course and the few ones enrolled for the course are faced with many problems ranging from lack of necessary teaching learning aids, there are so many decayed infrastructural materials in the classrooms, political instability in the society among others.

### **Low students' interest in the Language**

The students pay little or no attention to the learning of the language which eventually has negative effect on their proficiency and competency in the language. This attitude has led many French graduates to be unemployed and discouraged many Nigerian citizens from learning the language. Furthermore, it is also against the idea in the Federal Republic Nigeria fear in parents and young Nigerians who now see French language study as a course that does not guarantee a better future. challenges facing French Language Productivity in Nigeria Ajiboye, (1990), Soyoye (2001), Bamgbose (1977) feel that the statuses of the languages taught in the Nigerian schools are unwieldy for proper implementation. There is need therefore to establish and maintain an appreciable status for the languages in the National Policy on Education for successful implementation and productivity. The status of French language in the National Policy on Education; it is also contrary to the declaration made in 1997 by the then Head of State late General Sanni Abacha, given French a new status as second official language the country. Olayiwola & Ogundele (2015) remind Nigerians that: "The Nigerian government took a fundamental policy decision in 2002, making French the second official language as well as giving it a status of core subject in both Junior and Senior Secondary Schools curriculum." It is sad to note that French language is still been treated today as a foreign language. He further stated that "a foreign language is one that is not the mother tongue of any group in the country where it is taught" In other words, a foreign language is an exogenous language, with which a child does not share any socio-cultural, socio-political and socio-economic affinity, going by this definition, English, French, Arabic, German, Portuguese, Spanish, and Russian could be said to have successfully qualified for that status in the Nigerian system of education. Meanwhile,



French language (another foreign language like English) which is considered in the policy on education because of its peculiar advantages to Nigerian citizens did not receive same recognition as been given to English language.

Watti (2019) declares that, the poor teaching and learning of French has been muted in certain quarters as a result of lack of interest amongst other factors, the poor performance of French language in Nigerian schools has led to poor academic achievement of students in French language which has spilled over to poor performance of students in both internal and external examinations. Today, few students willingly enroll for French language as a course. School departments rely on prelim program in other to have some students in the departments. The few students that are now offering the language are handling the course with lack of seriousness because they see it as a course that cannot assure them a better and sound future. Olaseinde (2019) declares that many students find it difficult to relate what they have learnt with what they see outside the classroom. Presently, This attitude of Nigerians towards the study of French language in Nigerian schools is due to the fact that most of these people are not well oriented about the need of French in our educational system as an international language. This is also because they just assume that people should not whirl away their time going to school to study French language. The thought has misled and confused some of the students and parents; that they no longer have interest in studying the language.

### **Suggested ways to improve the teaching and learning of French Language**

Continuous training and re-training of teachers of French should be encouraged by the government through scholarship, training workshops, seminars and any other form of developmental training in other to attune the teachers to the very latest method of teaching the Language. Competent teachers of French with good communicative, writing, reading and listening skills should be employed and every other employment criteria based exclusively on certificate and foreign identity should be discouraged. The government should try as much as possible to fund mastering of French language in all tertiary institutions; by this the importance of French language in technology will be known in Nigeria. There should be written document to back up with actions in making the language compulsory for the students up to Senior Secondary School. Level (SSS). Government should train teachers and employ qualified teachers of French language.

All the Departments of French in the higher institutions and Universities must organise Workshops, Seminars and training courses within and outside the country for the bilinguists of French language, this will intensify their efforts towards the improvements of French language. More French language learning centres should be encouraged to provide educational support to other people who may be interested in learning the language outside school. Course like French major should be offered at NCE level for a functional and effective learning of the language. Teachers should be well remunerated in terms of salaries and allowances for better output. Enough lecture or teaching periods of having contacts with their teachers in a week should be given to the

teachers. Time input as one would discover has great effects on the output. Policy makers and other stakeholders in the education system should work out a working syllabus that will take care of immersion programme; that is, (exposure to French learning environment) for the primary and secondary education.

It is observed that French language learning at this level lacks the necessary exposure to French environment which is one of the vital processes in language acquisition. Government should set up an independent monitoring committee to monitor the implementation of the policy in the primary and secondary schools as well as in the higher institution. This will help the government to have access to adequate information on the state of matter in the institution as well as identifying areas that need to be improved on. There should be proper education and re-orientation of Nigerians by the government on the need to encourage the learning of French at all level and across disciplines.

### **Recommendation and Conclusion**

Issues in French language pedagogy are problems that can be controlled at least to an extent especially in Nigeria; the parents should provide the necessary things needed for their children such as: writing materials, books and so on. They should support them in making them to have interest in the subject. There should be opportunity for teachers to be trained and employed. The authorities should allow the French Language teachers to teach the course they are trained for.

If the teachers and learners improve on themselves by working diligently together; to achieve a set objective or goals in language learning, if the Nigerian government supports financially and otherwise, the educational sector should also provide the needed infrastructures, implementing the policies, carrying out professional training programs for the teachers and providing modern technological innovative facilities to aid teaching and learning. The problems will be solved.

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