

The Challenges of French Studies at Secondary School Level in Nigeria

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Abstract

A well structured educational system is undeniably a formidable key to a nation's development and survival in all spheres of life. Thus, every nation, via its ministry of Education is expected to give equal status and value to all subjects that are being offered at all strata of education. This is because every educated individual should be able to give back to the society positively through the training acquired. Therefore, this paper sets out, to discuss the challenges of French Language Studies in Nigeria at the Secondary School level. It shall go about this by explaining what language education means as well as presenting succinctly the history of French Language in Nigeria. The paper further discusses the challenges that teaching and learning French Language pose to French teacher and learner of the language in Nigeria. Secondary school education in Nigeria is an educational stage to be attended by students after primary school education and before tertiary institution. This is a period for youth direction on subject specialization, most especially at the senior secondary level, leading to issue of professionalization, based on subject compartmentalization and choice of higher institution.

Introduction

Education, according to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2001), is seen as a process of teaching, learning and acquiring, most especially in schools or colleges, in order to improve one's knowledge as well as giving room for the development of skills. Thus, one can boldly and generally see education as a strong instrument in all ramifications of human life.

From the sociological point of view, Durkheim (1950), a sociologist, argued that: "it is society as a whole and each particular social milieu that determines the ideal that education realizes. Society can survive only if there exists among its members a sufficient degree of homogeneity; education perpetuates and reinforces this homogeneity by fixing in the child from the beginning, the essential similarities that collective life demands. But on the other hand, without certain diversity, all cooperation would be impossible; education assumes the persistence of this necessary diversity by being itself diversified and specialized".

Education can also be defined as the sum total of the culture which societies deliberately give its younger generation in order to qualify them and raise the level of improvement it has attained. In a nutshell, education is the totality of life experiences. In simple term, Language Education can be explained as the teaching and learning of any language, either as a foreign or second language, in schools. Language Education is of paramount importance since it is a process by which a child develops the communicative attitude which is of positive values to his/her society. In this case, one can also add that Language Education is the formal acquisition of communicative skills by an individual.

However, school institutions remain a preparatory ground to empower and certify the requirement for human development. The teacher is faced with the challenges of educating, socializing, empowering and certifying students, but with the help of good teaching atmosphere. By implication, the task of a teacher, which includes sustaining education system, does not rest on his or her professional competency alone, but on the entire features of the school climate. But, public schools which are owned by the government and are predominantly occupied by citizens of lower socio-economic status in Nigerian society are facing challenges of substandard education, lack of adequate resources leading to poor teaching, students poor academic performance and dropping out.

Nigerian public secondary school climate is facing challenges of low operational quality and absence of required facilities to cater for teachers and students, which features: rampant examination malpractices, lack of parental commitment to school activities, high rate of bullying, dominance acts of indiscipline, gangsterism, illegal substance abuse, lack of proper supervision of students activities, inbuilt culture of incompetency and a general hopelessness leading to students' failure, truancy and dropout, which societies have blindly attributed to the classroom teacher's faults (Raymond, 2009; Wasagu, 2009; Abinboye, 2011).

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF FRENCH LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

An attempt on the teaching and learning of French in Nigeria dated as far back as 19th century. In 1878, the Wesley High School already included in its curriculum the teaching and learning of German and French languages respectively. But unfortunately, French language education was not officially introduced into the secondary school curriculum in Nigeria until 1956, thus, Kings College, Lagos and Government College, Ibadan need to be mentioned in this regard for pioneering the teaching and learning of French in this country (Timothy Asobele, 1999:32).

At tertiary level, the situation was not much different. The teaching and learning of French Language at the University level, for instance, was necessitated as those few lucky Nigerians who were products of the schools mentioned above were in quest for their University education. Consequently, as from 1960, shortly after Nigeria's independence, some Universities such as University of Ibadan, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, University of Lagos, University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) and Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria took up the challenge of the teaching and learning of French Language with expatriate lecturers like Henri G. J. Evans, Wilfred Feuser, Brann C. M. B. Etc. (Arowolo, 2004: 229; Falade, 2008: 71). Thus, the readers of this paper need to know that the first set of Nigerian French graduates were products of these famous Universities. And, many of them, after graduation, joined the noble teaching profession thereby reducing the dearth of French teachers in the system at that time.

At this juncture, it is our joy to stress that in Nigeria of today, some of these indigenous “fore-runners” and seasoned scholars of French language education in Nigeria are professors of French in their respective Universities, either at home or abroad. Among these scholars are Professor Abiola Irele, Victor O. Aire, Tunde Ajiboye, Kester O. Echenim, Adebola A. Kukoyi, Raymond O. Elaho, John E. Elerius, Unionmwan Edebiri, Paul E. Modurn, Pai Obanya, Olusola Oke, Emmanuel C. Nwezeh, etc. (Ajiboye, 2004).

Similarly, still on tertiary level, some Colleges of Education in the country known then as Advanced Teachers’ Colleges in the country then also joined in the struggle for French language education in Nigeria. Among these old colleges are; Adeyemi College of Education, Ondo, Alvan Ikoku College of Education. In the early 60s, there were already French graduates from these Colleges of Education.

Moreover, one notable feature of French as a foreign language in Nigeria from inception to date is its popularity as a subject as well as the extent of glory and recognition it does accord any school offering it. Although for quite some decades, much has been done by various experts in the field, French education in Nigeria is still being faced with a number of challenges to be discussed subsequently in this paper.

After many years of teaching and learning of French language in Nigerian Secondary School, we can only observe some progress in this regard. However, the state of French language is considerably weak. This is because the language is not made compulsory; till now, it remains optional in the Nigerian educational terrain. There are about 4,000 Secondary Schools in Nigeria that allow teaching and learning of French language, without counting the private schools that teach it at the Primary level. Still, this number has not changed the status of French language in the country.

However, we have been able to identify many factors that militate against the effective teaching and learning of French language. These challenges principally have their origin in the area of administration, family influence, social and religion.

In the area of administration: The Ministry of Education in Nigeria shows a total indifference to the recruitment of qualified and competent French teachers into the public schools and to provide the schools with the necessary teaching materials. In most secondary schools, there is no audio-visual materials to incite the pupils to learn the language with ease. Moreso, neither the pupils nor the teachers receive scholarship to participate in the summer training which takes place every year outside the domain of Nigeria. As we know that for one to be well established in a foreign language, such persons must participate in foreign trainings in native speakers’ countries’ to facilitate qualitative teaching and learning.

Another factor that militates against French language teaching in secondary schools is the perchance of Ministry of Education to withdraw experienced French teachers every academic session from schools in order to offer them administrative posts government. Furthermore, in a situation where French language teaching is completely abrogated, French lecturers are left with no option than to teach any other subjects like English language, Government, Literature-in-English, etc. This is therefore, making French pupils or students to abandon French Studies. However, in a bid to replace the French teachers, school authorities end up recruiting teachers who are not competent to teach the language. This may result in the change of teaching method. And as a

result, pupils may end up abdicating the language and go for a subject or subjects that they find interest in.

Apart from the aforementioned, another factor that poses as a challenge to French Studies in Secondary Schools in Nigeria is the negative attitude of schools managers towards French Language teaching. First of all, few hours are given to French in the timetable, sometimes, two or three periods of 40 minutes in a week are given to French, whereas English Language and Mathematics are taught everyday so that the students or pupils would have better understanding of the subjects. To make matters worse for French teaching instead of teaching the language (French) separately, it is joined with other subjects, such as: French/Religion; French/Economics; French/Arabic; French/Geography etc. This means that French teaching takes place at the same time with the above listed subjects and this renders the teaching and comprehension of French Language ineffective. The aftermath of this is that the pupils are faced with the problem of choice. Because of that, they end up choosing other subjects.

Science Factor: Nigerian Government puts emphasis on the Sciences in the new educational system; this has been identified as a factor that determines the non-recognition of French language. French is classified among other subjects as one of the less important subjects for national development. Today, to be a beneficiary of government and companies' scholarship, one must pursue one's studies in the Sciences, Law and Engineering.

Family Influence: We should not forget that in African society, family influence on the school subjects remains very strong. For the parents, learning French only brings one to teaching "a subject without honour". For them, being a Medical Doctor, Lawyer, Engineer, Banker, Architect, etc is more honourable than becoming a French Language teacher. Many parents do not know the importance of French language. They even discourage their wards from learning it in schools. For example, if you tell secondary school pupils or students to buy a recommended French textbook, they would say that their parents said that French is not compulsory and as a result of that, they would not purchase the text. This attitude towards the learning of French language makes the teaching of the former, cumbersome and difficult for teachers who cannot painstakingly endure the huddle of French teaching.

Poor Remuneration of Teachers: Another area where French teaching is disadvantaged is the poor remuneration of teachers at all levels of education in Nigeria. French teachers in Nigeria are not sufficiently remunerated because of bad conditions of service as well as lack of encouragement. Because of this, they put less enthusiasm in achieving the optimal goal or result in their chosen careers; in most cases, the teachers work with little professional conscience. Consequently, many among them (French teachers) rush to grasp other professions. Sometimes, because of this discouragement, many graduates abandon French to study something else at post graduate level.

Insufficient Number of Well-trained French Teachers: Absence or shortage of well-trained French teachers has contributed immensely to poor teaching and learning of the language. In most Nigerian secondary schools, only one or two teachers cover the JSS and SSS classes. Quite a good number of French graduates are produced in Nigeria and their qualities are undeniably

poor. Many of them are not conversant with the new approaches to the teaching and learning of French. This actually makes their level of productivity very low.

Insufficient Number of Periods: Nigerian secondary schools face the challenge of insufficient number of periods in the schools' timetables. In most schools in Nigeria, French is allotted only one or two periods a week on timetables except in Federal Government Colleges or Pilot Schools which serve as experimental schools for the French Government. Whereas English language is allotted up to five periods a week and in the morning hours, French is given only one or two periods a week and in the afternoon when the school environment is usually rowdy and noisy and the learners are fagged out after playing during breaks. Nothing can be more discouraging than this, given that both French and English are foreign languages to the children. However, to encourage the effective teaching of French language in Nigeria, its status must be placed side by side with that of English language.

According to Morakinyo(2006),:

(...)French is unlike English which is a sine qua non for students seeking admission to higher institutions. Even a failure grade (F) in French in the SSCE does not affect student's grade at the end of their secondary education (...) If, at least a "Pass" in French is made compulsory for students in their certificate before they can gain admission to any higher institution as in the case of English, the story would have been different"

Multiple Recommendations of French Textbooks: This is an important factor that must be considered while talking about the challenges of French language learning in a francophone territory like the one Nigeria is. Many Nigeria secondary students are faced with the problem of the exact French textbooks to use. As teachers and learners face problems of too many teaching methods, they are also confronted with so many textbooks to be used for instructions. At a time in our secondary schools, it was as many as France Afrique, Bonjour Afrique, Practical French ,Contacts, Trans-Afrique, On y va, etc. In most cases, the learner faces a lot of problems because of the abstract nature of these textbooks or manuals may be because they are not linked to the language needs of the learners. Some of the textbooks are written based on European background and culture that evidently are different from that of the Nigerian learners. As a result, an Anglophone learner of French may be discouraged in learning the language when confronted with the following words in the areas of phonetics and orthography:

<u>French</u>	<u>English</u>
Couscous	couscous
Fromage	cheese
Neige	snow
Fonio	a type of cercal
L'arbre de karate	karate tree.etc.

These words are obviously strange to an average Nigerian child or even adults who have not crossed our borders, hence Azubuiké(2010)explained that:

The student who comes in contact with a foreign language will find some features of it quite easy and others extremely difficult. Those elements that are similar to his native language will be simple for him and those elements that are different will be difficult.

Even the names of people used in the textbooks or manuals are from foreign cultures, for example, Kweku, Dumas, Dialo, Olympio, Kerekou, Toure, Solange, Fatou, etc. All these continue to increase the strangeness of French language to the Nigerian secondary school learner and she/he continues to lose interest in the language.

Apart from the foregoing, I once asked my students at Glory Years' International High School, in Ado-Ekiti to give their views about French teaching and learning. The factors mentioned below were their responses:

- **Lack of Competent French Teachers:** In the absence of qualified teachers, most schools employ unqualified teachers to teach French Language. Some schools even employ Francophone persons who did not study French to teach it based on the fact that he/she can speak the language.
- **Poor listening skills:** For the fact that the students cannot pronounce French words, they prefer doing other things than to listen to their French teacher in class.
- **Low Salary of French Teachers:** In private schools, the salary for teachers is very little. Most schools do not pay their teachers a living wage. For instance, a French teacher that is paid N10, 000. 00 per month, considering the economic situation in Nigeria, would have to quit teaching and search for a more "remunerative" employment.
- **Student Misconception about the Study of French Language:** Students misconceive that there is no where that the study of French language would take them other than becoming a teacher.
- **Unfriendly French Teachers:** This is a very powerful factor that mostly dissuade pupils/ students of secondary schools in learning French language. Most French teachers (especially the unqualified ones) are too strict and unfriendly to students which make the students to dislike the language. Furthermore, as a result of the teachers' incompetence, they do not know how to explain to the students very well in the class. Sometimes, they write notes on the board and tell the students to copy.
- **Students Inability to Read and Study their Texts:** This factor is somehow insurmountable because the language is not spoken outside the classroom. so the students would just close their books even at home. This challenge is faced by the students because of their inability to pronounce French words correctly.

According to Ademola Michael (2005):

“Another major challenge facing French language education in Nigeria is in the area of putting into practice the communicative method of teaching in relation to available teaching materials. It has been discovered that contents of textbooks such as Studio 100 available to set this new language teaching technique in motion are too foreign. Therefore, Nigerian students studying French do find such materials difficult to understand as their contents do not reflect learners’ cultures or things in their immediate environment”

Inability to comprehend foreign materials by the students makes it cumbersome and dissuading to have indefatigable enthusiasm in French. However, those Nigerians that are experts in the language should try to write communicable textbooks in French with audio CD or visual CD so that it would be easy for the learners to copy or mimic the correct pronunciation while reading.

Recommendations

- French Language should be made compulsory for all students at the Senior Secondary School level in order to sustain and perfect its learning progression.
- Government should set up a monitoring committee to ensure the implementation of the educational policy on the teaching and learning of French at Primary and Secondary levels.
- Nigerians should be better educated and informed on the need to encourage the learning of French at all levels of education and in fact, across disciplines.
- Indigenous experts in French should intensify more efforts towards producing more teaching materials in order to discourage the use of the foreign ones that are making learning of French difficult for Nigerians.
- During the Parents Teachers Associations (PTA) meetings, parents should be oriented about the importance of French Language in Nigeria, being that “she” is surrounded by Francophone countries.
- Periodic Workshops should be organised for French Teachers.
- Literature should be re-introduced into the syllabus so that the pupils or Secondary School students would have access to enough vocabularies so that they can express themselves in French fluently.
- Exposing French teachers to international conferences, seminars and excursions.
- French Government as well as Ministry of Education in France should help those who are interested in French language to achieve their aims.

Conclusion

To ensure the survival and success of French Language in Nigeria, the Ministry of Education must supply necessary materials on French to secondary schools. Materials such as French textbooks, audio-visual materials should be supplied to schools in order to make French Language

teaching easy. This would also prevent French teachers from abandoning the teaching of French Language for another profession. The condition of French teaching and learning must be improved upon so that the teacher teaching the language would be happy and gets satisfied with his/her job. Just as we know that job satisfaction leads to better job performance. Besides, to drive deeper in their teaching methodology, the authorities should from time to time send French teachers every year to re-training courses aboard. Furthermore, there is need for national commitment to French Language Education in the country. The time of ignorance has passed. All Nigerians should be ready to be French compliant, if they want to remain relevant in this fast changing world.

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