
French Language Education in Nigeria: Significance and Status

A. J. Saleh

ABSTRACT

French is one of the international languages most widely used in commerce, science, technology, research, administration, education, literature among others. This study reviews French language education in Nigeria. The objective is to examine the significance and status of French as one of the international languages studied in Nigeria. The work tries to find out the reasons for learning French language in Nigeria. Literature shows that French is a foreign language in Nigeria because it is not indigenous to any ethnic group in Nigeria. It has an unfamiliar phonology in a multilingual and diverse cultural society such as Nigeria. The work recommends that the teaching of French language should be included in the primary school curriculum since the language has gained an international status. The teaching of the language should also be restructured in the secondary school curriculum where every student would learn the language beyond Junior Secondary School level.

Keywords: *French, language, official, global, status*

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is a multilingual and multicultural nation with numerous indigenous languages, with English as the second language, while French, German, Arabic and European are foreign languages (Faniran, 2016). However, there are about 400 indigenous languages (Bamgbose 1971; Babajide (2001) spoken by about 250 ethnic groups in Nigeria (Achebe 2012). None of the indigenous languages has been conferred official language in Nigeria. Each ethnic group has a warmhearted accessory to their indigenous language, hence will intensely resist an effort to force a language of another ethnic group on them. To avoid the squabble that would have accompanied the recognition of an indigenous language as an official language in Nigeria, the Federal Government evades implementing one indigenous language as an official language. Nevertheless, language is unique to man; no other specie possesses a truly symbolic means of communication and no

A. J. Saleh, Ph.D, is a Lecturer in the Department of English, Nasarawa State College of Education, Akwanga. E-mail: salehwunka@gmail.com.



human society, however simple its material culture, lacks the basic human heritage of a well-developed language (Greenberg, 1971). The definitions of language are wrought with some ideological and semantic differences because it is impossible to find a definition against which we could not raise at least one objection (Elugbe, 1991).

In the early 19th century, the British government conquered and seized the territory around the River Niger area; after the conquest and seizure, a colonial administrator, Lord Frederick Lugard, was appointed by the government in London to take charge of the new British colony, known as and called Nigeria (Faniran, 2017). This marks the beginning of the use of English as the only official language in Nigeria. As the language system grows in Africa, the Yaoundé Conference (1961) suggests French language to be learned, taught and examined as a school discipline in Anglophone Africa, including Nigeria (Faniran, 2016).

As there was growing concern about the attitude of Nigerians towards the study of French, the federal government set up the Nigerian French Village in 1991 as an inter-University Centre for French studies (Faniran, 2016). Despite the fact that Nigerian Government wants French to be studied as a major subject at Primary and Junior Secondary schools level, many public schools still remain adamant on the full implementation of the policy (Falade, 2008 cited in Ademola 2009). On December 14, 1996, the then Minister of Education under the Military Head of State, General Sanni Abacha declared at the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, that French would be introduced as a second official language and studied compulsorily in the primary, secondary and post-secondary levels of our educational system. The policy, according to the Minister, would in a short time make Nigeria to become bilingual (Igboanusi and Putz, 2008; Faniran, 2017). This decision, according to Igboanusi and Putz (2008) marks the beginning of the formal recognition of French as a second official language in Nigeria.

French language has an unfamiliar phonology in a multilingual and diverse cultural society like Nigeria. It shares with English language the dissimilarity of being taught as a foreign language in the educational systems of most African countries in which Nigeria is not exempted (Faniran, 2016). But Ademola (2009) concludes that the features of mother-tongue interference, code-mixing and code-switching make learning of French language in Nigeria quite interesting because of diverse languages and dialects. In the opinion of Ajiboye (2004), French is one of the most important foreign languages used by most countries. French language has gained ascendancy among different international languages because of its pertinence in all spheres of life. French is one of the international languages most widely used in commerce, science, technology, research, administration, education, literature among others. According to Faniran (2016), Nigeria is



geographically bounded by francophone countries such as Niger Republic in the North, Chad in the East, Cameroun in the South and Benin Republic in the West. Therefore, to achieve mutual communication and interaction with our neighbours, it is necessary for every Nigerian to communicate fluently in French (Ademola, 2009).

French language is one of the colonial languages imported to Africa. The French language has evolved in the continent since pre-independence days with its policy of assimilation and association. It is taught as an official and second language in Nigeria, West Africa and in some countries of the world as Omolewa (1978) opines that the teaching of French language started in Nigeria from 1859-1959. The teaching and learning of French language have brought inter-cultural affinity between Nigeria and the French community. A good number of Nigerians are not sufficiently informed about the usefulness of French in our educational system or its importance as an international language (Faniran, 2016). They feel that people who study French language especially in the tertiary institutions are slow learners, or a course for dumping students who did not pass their intended course of study (Faniran, 2016). Hence, the objective of this study is to review the significance and status of French language education in Nigeria with a view to tapping its prospects.

French Language Education in Nigeria

Language education is the teaching and learning of any language, either as a foreign or second language in a school; it is also the formal acquisition of communicative skills by an individual (Omolewa, 1978). Ademola (2009) views education as a process of teaching, learning and training, most especially in schools and colleges in order to improve one's knowledge as well as giving room for development of skills. However, French language education draws special attention in Nigeria because of the country's historical background, geographical location as well as its heterogeneous nature (Ademola, 2009). The teaching and learning of French language in Nigeria dated back to the 19th century. It was in 1878, that Wesley High School included the teaching and learning of German and French languages in its curriculum (Ademola 2009). However, French language education was not officially introduced into the secondary school curriculum in Nigeria until King's College, Lagos and Government College, Ibadan pioneered the teaching and learning of French as a foreign language in 1956 (Timothy-Asobele, 1999). The teaching and learning of French language at the tertiary education level was seen to be indispensable as Nigerians who studied French language at the secondary schools would have to further the study of the course to the higher level. The University of Ibadan, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, University of Lagos, University

of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) and Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria introduced the teaching and learning of French language in their curriculum (Arowolo, 2004; Falade, 2008). This was immediately after Nigeria's independence. Still at the higher education level in Nigeria, some institutions known then as Advanced Teachers' College, which include Adeyemi College of Education, Ondo, Alvan Ikoku College of Education and University of Lagos College of Education also introduced French language into their curriculum (Ademola 2009).

Status of French Language in Africa and Nigeria

One of the happenings that made French language a known language in Nigeria is the custom of signing the Governor's book contained in a gate house at the entrance to Government House in Lagos (Faniran, 2016). The declaration of French as second official language of Nigeria during late General Sani Abacha's regime in 1996 paved more way for the recognition of French language education by some of our policy makers (Ademola, 2009). The Minister of Education under the Military Head of State, General Sanni Abacha declared at the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, on December 14, 1996 that French would be introduced as a second official language and studied compulsorily in the primary, secondary and post-secondary levels of our educational system. Federal Republic of Nigeria (FGN) (2004) officially states the status of French language in the National Policy on Education as follows:

For smooth interaction with our neighbours, it is desirable for every Nigerian to speak French. Accordingly, French 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.

At present, French is treated as a foreign language because it is not indigenous to any ethnic group in Nigeria. In other words, it is a language which majority of educated Nigerians do not speak or need at all, and which almost all uneducated Nigerians know nothing about (Faniran 2017). But it is a pity that after many years, the vision about making at least 70% of Nigerians internationally bilingual in French language has not fully materialized (Ademola, 2009). The Minister of State for Education, under President Mohammmadu Buhari government, Professor Anthony Anwukah, on Sunday, 31st January, 2016, announced that the Federal Government will soon reintroduce French as the Nation's second official language (Dokunola, 2016).

French is a subject in the curriculum but few pupils have interest in studying it, probably owing to the fact that French teachers are usually not available (Faniran,

2017). Be that as it may, the status of French language in Nigerian schools is unstable as many Nigerians are still in their state of confusion over whether French should be treated as a second official language or as a foreign language (Ademola, 2009). French is not a means of communication among Nigerians as no social gathering such as wedding, birthday party, church or mosque service use French as the medium of communication (Faniran, 2017). It is only learnt in the classroom and spoken mostly by French teachers and students in French classes. However, there has been mutual cooperation and agreement signed by both France and Nigeria (The Guardian Newspaper, March 13, 1994 cited in Faniran, 2016). Therefore for Nigerians to interact effectively with francophone countries, they should not only speak the language fluently but also read, write and understand (Faniran, 2016).

Significance of Learning French Language

Connections are becoming inevitable among people, nations and organizations of the world which warrants a huge need for knowing more than one foreign or international language (Ademola, 2009). Hence, French language education will positively impact on Nigerian youths if additional knowledge of an international language like French is acquired. French language functions as communicative, informative, economic, interactive, socio-cultural, diplomatic and educative tools. Developing more passion for French language education by Nigerian military will help them communicate better during their various military operations abroad, especially those on peace-keeping mission in some francophone countries (Ademola, 2009).

As language of international society that is only rivaled by English, French will surely serve as a linguistic visa in disciplines like Banking, Pharmacy, Secretary ship, Medicine, Commerce, scientific and technological research among others (Bariki, 2004). French is the second most widely learned foreign language after English, and the sixth most widely spoken language in the world. French is also the only language, alongside English, that is taught in every country in the world. France operates the biggest international network of cultural institutes, which run French-language courses for close to a million learners. Communication of ideas, either in oral or in writing, can never be ignored among human beings. Therefore, the use of common language remains a strong key in the areas such as trade, tourism, international relations, technology, science and media (Ademola, 2009). The trend of globalization is a reason Nigerians should strive to embrace the teaching and learning of French as the officially recognized nation's second official language (Ademola, 2009). In addition, the French Cultural Network in Nigeria (Nd) highlights 17 good reasons to learn French. They are as follows:

-
1. Learning one language is not enough
 2. French is, along with English, the only language spoken on all five continents
 3. A career asset
 4. An introduction to an incomparable cultural universe
 5. An advantage for studying in France
 6. Visiting Paris and the rest of France
 7. The language of international relations
 8. A language that opens up the world
 9. A language of reasoning and debate
 10. The language of enlightenment
 11. A language that is fun to learn
 12. A language for learning other languages
 13. A high standard of teaching
 14. A creative language
 15. Many exchange opportunities
 16. A unique system of French international schools
 17. Promoting linguistic diversity.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This work has added voice to the call for the teaching and learning of French as an international language in addition to other international languages like English, Portuguese, Spanish, Arabic, Hebrew, Swahili, Hausa among others. The teaching and learning of this language would create more job opportunities for young Africans since the language is an international language. The training and retraining of the teachers of the language would enhance fluency and articulation of the students in the language.

For French language to attain its full status of a second official language in Nigeria, it should be used alongside English in the preparation and publication of various official documents (Ademola 2009). Furthermore, it is compulsory for every Nigerian delegate who wants to be more relevant and comfortable at any meeting, conference, seminar and workshop outside the shores of this country. In view of the above discourse, this study makes the following recommendations:

1. The teaching and learning of French language should be included in the primary school curriculum to improve fluency and articulation, competence and performance.
2. The curriculum of teaching and learning of French language should be restructured to accommodate every student in Junior Secondary School level.



-
-
3. More teachers of French language should be trained and employed to teach the language.
 4. Seminars/workshops should be organized annually to sharpen the skills, techniques and methods of teaching the language.
 6. The French government should also consider scholarship awards

REFERENCES

- Achebe, C.** (2012). *There was a country. A Personal History of Biafra*. London: Allen Lane.
- Ademola, M.** (2009). French language education in Nigeria: Prospects & challenges. Accessed online from https://www.academia.edu/7845045/French_Language_Education_In_Nigeria_Prospects_And_Challenges_By_Ademola_Michael. Retrieved on 29/09/2017.
- Ajiboye, T.** (2004). *Fore-runners of French in Nigeria*. Ilorin: Info- links Publishers.
- Arowolo, B.** (2004). *Professor Femi Ojo-Ade: A Singer of Black Potentials*. In Ajiboye (ed.) *Fore-runners of French in Nigeria*. Ilorin: Info-links Publishers.
- Babajide, A.** (2001). *Language Attitude patterns of Nigerians*. In Igboanus, H. (ed) (2001) *Language Attitude and Language Conflict in Africa*. Ibadan: Enicrownfit Publishers.
- Bamgbose, A.** (1971). *The English Language in Nigeria*. In: Spencer, J. (ed.), *The English Language in Africa*. London: Longman.
- Bariki, O.** (2004). *Uplifting the Status of French in Nigeria: An Overview of Professor Tunde Ajiboye's Contribution*. In Ajiboye (ed.) *Fore-runners of French in Nigeria*. Ilorin: Info-links Publishers.
- Dokunola** (2016). FG makes French studies compulsory for Nigerian students. <https://www.legit.ng/715240-stop-press-buharis-minister-added-one-compulsory-subject-nigerias-curriculum.html>.
- Elugbe, B.** (1995). *Nigeria Pidgin: Problems and Prospects*. Ibadan: Mosuro.
- Falade, J. O.** (2008). French Graduates and French Teaching in the Nigerian Educational System. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 9, 1.
- Faniran, K. F.** (2016). The Role of French Language in Developing 21st Century Nigerian Graduates. *Journal of Literature, Languages and Linguistics*, 23, 64-69.
- Faniran A. O.** (2017). French as a Second Official Language in Nigeria: Problems, Prospects and Implications for the Future of the English Language in Nigeria.



European Journal of English Language, Linguistics and Literature, 4(1), 7-15.

Federal Republic of Nigeria (FGN) (2004). *National Policy on Education* (4th edition). Lagos: NERDC Press.

Greenberg, J. H. (1971). *Language, culture and communication*. Stanford: University Press.

Igboanusi, H. and Putz, M. (2008) The Future of French in Nigeria's. Language Policies. *Journal of multilingual and Multicultural Development* 29,(3) 235-259.

Omolewa, M. (1978). The teaching of French language in Nigeria. *Cahiers d'etudes africaines*, 18(71), 379-396.

Timothy-Asobele, S. J. (1999). *Le François au Nigeria: Une Cartographie Dynamique*. Lagos: Printview Publishers.

The French Cultural Network in Nigeria (Nd). 17 Good Reasons to Learn French. Available online at: <https://www.institutfrançais-nigeria.com/17-good-reasons-to-learn-French/>.

