

A Review of the Ordeals of Learning a Foreign Language in Nigeria: French Language in Focus

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ABSTRACT

An international bilingual person certainly has access to information and exposure than one with only one international language, In this regards, Nigerians have to learn a second official language – French which will certainly help to fit into the globalised economy successfully Considering the fact that language is the heartbeat of all communication. Hence this paper through a sociolinguistic approach tends to highlight the sufferings encountered in learning this second official language and then recommends differs steps to alleviate these unpleasant rigours which have presented the language as an insurmountable mountain and a round peg in a square hole to learners of the language in Nigeria. This will hopefully contribute to the progress of French teaching and learning in Nigeria.

Introduction

Nigeria is a federal state with her federal capital territory in Abuja. It is an Anglophone country in West – Africa surrounded by many francophone countries such as Niger in the North, Cameroon in the East, Benin Republic in the West and TChad in the North-East. It is the most populated of the African countries. In Nigeria, there are diverse cultures and three principal ethnic groups – Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa. Hence, to bring unity between Nigerians and their francophone counter parts, it is necessary to get language elites who can speak fluently the two international languages in the region and in the whole world. And, this leads to the question of teaching and learning English and French.

Language performs a unifying and separatist function. This refers to the feeling of members of a social group that they are united and identified with others who speak the same language while they contrast with or are separated from others who speak other languages. Language characterizes human beings who use it to express their ways of life. Nigeria as a country bounded by French colonized and French speaking countries would be left with no choice than to get herself acquainted with the French language for easy integration of ideas, culture and developmental benefits; thereby fitting into the globalized world as its learning expands one's view of the world; thereby it encourages a critical reflection on the relation of language and culture. Language is an instrument of communication. It is not just a set of symbols, it often confirms roughly to grammar, a system or rules used to manipulate the symbols. It is a specific means through which the human race communicates with each other. It is the tool which provides the means of expressing meaning. The European colonization in Africa is characterized by the development of urban centres in most of the regions and not because of the thorough penetration of the continent. These urban centres were placed on the autochthon population, a particular attraction caused by their economic activities. It is therefore essential that the Africans in the towns who came in contact with the Europeans speak the Europeans' language. Hence, the bilingual nature of Africans in this case is not only superficial but the European language is seen as a necessary tool for international exchange and it is then adopted as an official language by the new African nations. Every language is situated within a group of speakers who have something in common. Hence language users may be people living in the same community with a common origin, profession and social class to mention just a few. Such a group of people tend to behave alike because the environment or context in which they operate constrains them to use language in a particular way. The use of language puts an outstanding mark of difference between human beings and animals.

English language is a legacy left behind in Nigeria by the British at the end of the colonial administration. It is now the language of government, business and commerce, education, literature, the mass media, internal

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and external communication in Nigeria. In practice therefore, English is the only effective medium of communication among Nigerians from different linguistic backgrounds. Though English language is not indigenous to Nigeria; its function as medium of communication in official business in the country has given it a status of official language. Learning a foreign language is like the two sides of a coin which one has the choice of choosing either the head or the tail at the expense of one's exposure. It is therefore a compulsory task on the part of the learner to put in all effort to be able to speak a language which is totally different from his mother tongue since every language is a system with sufficient resources for communicating its speakers' intentions, desires and beliefs. Generally, every individual is born with an instinct of a particular language which is made manifest as such individual grows. However, every country in the world has her native means (mother tongue) and official means (lingua franca) of communication. Nigeria as a multilingual country of almost 550 distinct ethnic languages which is characterized by the geo-political zones and being colonized by the British speaks English language as her lingua franca. This to a large extent helps in solving the problems of misconception of ideas which lack of understanding one dialect or the other might cause; as switching from one language to another is a means of reducing mutual unintelligibility (misconceptions). Hence, English language is the means of communication in schools, offices and at meetings to mention just a few. This in essence gives room to wider exposure on the part of the citizens. It is total language colonization as it would be impossible for anyone who cannot communicate in English language to be acceptable in the academic environment, meetings and or other gatherings, hence its compulsion in the school curriculum from the cradle to any academic level. This step has to contend with a lot of interferences as each Nigerian who has to learn the official language- English already has in his memory a language of communication - the mother tongue which can be Yoruba, Ibo, Hausa, Efik, Igbo to mention just a few. Moreover, years after years, the English language becomes a household name to an average Nigerian to an extent that though it is an official language, it has become some Nigeria's first language acquired - their mother tongue—as children are now being brought up to speak foreign language(s) such as English in Nigeria. This simply means that considering the fact that Nigeria is a multilingual country, an average Nigerian who wants to learn a second official language has in his brain a minimum of two languages - the mother tongue (which can be Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa and Efik to mention just a few) and English language (the official language in Nigeria). Thus, it becomes a great task learning another official language such as French language, German language or Portuguese language which has their origin - Latin - as that of the first official language (English language) as it is obvious that there must be an interference of one into the other as the European languages will certainly have similarities and differences in their phonology, morphology, semantics, syntax and lexis. This then explains the reason why a learner of a particular language must in-depthly examines the language in question carefully. This means that the learner must know what the language he/she is about to learn and the language or languages he / she already knows and speaks have in common as well as what distinguishes them from the other as it is quite evident that the intricate details found in one language turn up in the other language. However, the French language is chosen as the main focus of this paper among all other foreign languages because Nigeria is surrounded by and share boundaries with French speaking countries.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this paper is based on the theory of auto segmental phonology proposed by John GoldSmith in 1976 which affirms that a large part of phonological generalizations can be interpreted as restructuring or reorganization of the auto segments in a representation. This then explains why linguistic interference cannot be totally ruled out in the teaching and learning of languages, most especially when the languages are of the same origin. The French language is a foreign language in Nigeria, this is because it is taught and learnt outside its natural domain. This transplantation poses problems for learners of the language as Nigerian learners of French language are yet to appreciate the learning of the language as they do to its counterpart - English language. This in essence affirms the fact that French as a language of the colonial master has come to a community where it has to compete with linguistic loyalties. The Nigeria's choice of French language is not by force of political domination but it is seen as a choice among diplomatic options. Besides, on seeing many advantages to get out of it if French language is introduced as a language in the country, the Nigeria government adopt French language as a new means of communication between her and her neighboring countries in order to get rid of the linguistic barriers. It should be noted that the introduction of French as a school subject in Nigeria dated back before independence and this was done to equip students with both linguistic and communicative competence of French language because French language is the official language of the bordering colonized countries (Tchad, Bénin, Cameroun and Niger) and of highly technologically advanced nations such as France, Canada and Belgium. After the independence,

the necessity to teach and learn the French language was seen as a way and means of approaching the problems of language notably; the problems of communication between Nigeria and her neighboring francophone countries. At that time, French language was limited to secondary schools such as Igbobi College(SMS), St. Gregory(SMA),Kings College (all these schools are in Lagos) with emphasis on writing, reading and translation which in essence made the language popular among Nigerian students. Moreover, Nigeria's position within the West African sub-region will be well appreciated and of more developmental benefits to the country if Nigerians can speak this second official language which is the frontline language of the ECOWAS. Also, there are so many enterprises such as CFAO, Elf, Total, and Peugeot to mention just a few in Nigeria that would need the services of workers with the knowledge of French language. In "Nigeria Concord" of 12th May 1984, it was noted by O.A Amupitan that a French company "La Fougerolle" recruited the Togolese, the Ivoirians, the Beninenses and the Cameroonians to work as labourers for the construction of the dam at Jebba in Kwara State. This is because Nigerian citizens who could have benefited this opportunity of job employment in their fatherland are Anglophones who could not speak French language. Hence, taking into consideration this and other reasons, It is then evident that a Nigerian with the knowledge of French language has a better chance over his counterpart that lacks the knowledge of the language.

According to Nelson Brooks (1964:22); 'Magic of Language', it is possible for one to pick up a language other than his mother tongue and master it to a good level of competence. In essence, in July 2008, the government of Nigeria and France signed a funding agreement to implement a project which would improve the teaching of French language at the basic, secondary and tertiary levels. Also, the Permanent Secretary of the Federal Ministry of Education; Professor Oladapo Afolabi in his speech at a steering committee meeting for the French language project tagged "Support for the development and Teaching of French in the Nigerian Education System" held in Abuja in 2010, emphasized the necessity for Nigerians to speak French. This is because, in a world that is increasingly interdependent, Nigerians can no longer afford to remain internationally monolingual because success depends on the ability of an individual to function as a member of a global village whose members speak a variety of languages, hence learning a foreign language is no longer a pastime but a necessity. With the importance of and opportunities that French language has to offer a Nigerian citizen, it is enough reason to make the learning of this second official language - French - in Nigeria an interesting act with maximum enthusiasm at the thought of speaking the language but on the contrary, it is more of a difficult task than having fun to the Nigerian learners of the language; considering the various problems encountered in the course of learning the language. It is obvious that English language which is the lingua franca and the language of instruction in schools is well adorned and admired by students at all levels of education, however, the introduction of French language as a compulsory subject in the secondary school curriculum is seen as of no importance and total time wastage. This is because the language is not given the adequate publicity it requires; hence teachers of the language most especially at the secondary school level are mocked by the students. Linguistic interference is a very great problem of a Nigerian learner of French language. It is the alterations which a learner must follow in a foreign language because of the previous knowledge of his/her mother tongue or the official language he has first acquired. Different contexts of language use have their distinct social identity, phonology, phonetics and style marker. However, GoldSmith proposal suggest various testable speculations about language acquisition by learners which provides an escape route for assumptions. It should be noted that linguistic interference varies from one situation to another; considering the fact that French language to a Nigerian learner can never be his/her first language but rather it is certainly the third or fourth language; hence its contact with two or many Nigerian languages as well as English language. For instance, when a Nigerian French speaker interchanges sound /f/ for /v/ and /s/ for /z/ and vice versa in a conversation; as in /fusafe/ instead of /vuzave/, it is easy to identify such a person's origin to be from the Yoruba speaking region of Southern Nigeria. However, the greatest influence on the pronunciation of French words and sentences by Nigerian learners is from the sound systems of the regional languages in Nigeria. This in essence explains why there always exists interference at the level of phonology, semantics, syntax, lexis and vocabulary.

On the level of syntax and semantics, the variations could be noticed in the translation of different sentences.

For example: (i) I am going to the library.

LIBRARY: A building in which collections of books, tapes, newspapers and other educational materials are kept for people to read, study or borrow.

(ii) Je vais à la librairie.

LIBRAIRIE: A shop where books are sold.

This is an inevitable error in learning a foreign language in a multicultural and multilingual country like Nigeria. Hence, the regional languages and English language have different influences of both positive and negative transfer of their accents and meanings into French language. Also, taking into consideration English language as the social and intellectual language of communication, learning the prepositions is at first developing new French automatisms despite all unequal linguistic levels in favour of English .e.g. the variation of nature, form, mood and agreement of verbs with the subjects. This explains the fact that French language as one of the modern living languages and despite its difficulties; is more complex than English language. That is, while English language lays emphasis on the tense of the verb of a sentence, the French language lays emphasis on the agreement of the verb in gender and in number with both the subject and the auxiliary verb which changes arbitrarily according to the tense of the verb in the sentence and despite the fact that there are rules for the formation of these tenses in French language, there are always exceptions to the rules which no one can really deduce the cogent reason for the arbitral change in the rule.

For examples:

- (i) The girls fell down the stairs => Les filles sont tombées de l'escalier
- (ii) The girl fell down the stairs => La fille est tombée de l'escalier

The gender issue of words in French language is another unavoidable rule in the language. The use of the definite and indefinite articles in French language is a fundamental problem to the Anglophone learners of French language; who cannot easily locate the mark of distinction between the masculine and the feminine nature of words. More so, some words according to the French language standing rule do not take articles before them .i.e. professions and nationalities. An Anglophone learner will certainly needs to be convinced, the reason why for example; "a chalk" – "une craie" is said to be feminine while "a duster" – "un chiffon" is masculine, when both .i.e. "chalk and duster" are objects in the classroom. The environment is another greater factor militating against the learning of the French language.

Learning a foreign language in an environment where 20% of the population speaks the language and 30% have interest in the language certainly gives room to lack of interest in the language as there will be lack of encouragement needed from the immediate environment. This is because at least 60% of the population is less exposed to the opportunities that are there in if the language is learnt. In Ejigbo, in Osun State – Nigeria, French is a household name simply because most of the inhabitants of the town have business transactions with the Ivoirians or majority have lived in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire, which in essence has given birth to cross breeding either through marriage or friendship. Also, most teachers of French language especially in secondary schools lack the motivation technique to inculcate the interest of the language in the students as the teaching of such a subject is supposed to be total teacher to student relationship in a comical, loving and motivating atmosphere. It should be noted here that even most of the teachers at the secondary school level are good only at writing the language but find it difficult to speak the language fluently. This thereby confirms the assertion that a teacher is his or her students' role model. More so, it is a difficult task for interested learners of French language to lay their hands on materials such as French textbooks, dictionaries and other academic aids that can boost personal training of the language and at times when they are even available, they are always very expensive leaving the learner with no choice than to forgo it for English language materials that are readily available at the cheapest prices. For example, the language immersion program in the higher institution's curriculum is to help French language learners with the spoken and written form of French language. During summer in 1963-1964, the University of Ibadan and University of Nsukka sent their French language students to Dakar and also to France respectively for a summer course at Institute of Touraine in Tours where they were taken to so many important places of interest which facilitate the students' knowledge about French civilization. These trainees were given 22,000 CFA a month in form of scholarship. Also between 1970 and 1981, France gave scholarships to Nigerian students studying the French language and 40 institutions which comprises of both government and private schools benefitted. Meanwhile, due to the economic recession in Nigeria, it has been difficult for the learners of French language to continue to have this financial assistance even from France who is the native speaker of the language and its civilization.

Analysis

Ogundokun (2013: 13) remarks thus: "the issue of foreign language acquisition should not be treated with a pint of salt considering its contributions to the societal developments of countries. . ." The major objective of

this paper is to review the causes of the problems encountered by learners of French language as a second official language in Nigeria (since its introduction) in the course of learning the language and to offer possible suggestions that may alleviate this challenge.

However, it is strongly observed that the Nigerian government is not responding actively to the call of the needs of the second official language in giving maximum awareness to the importance of learning the language. What the government is doing as far as the learning of French language is concerned begins and ends on paper without any follow-up to its actualization and reality, putting side by side the effort of other external organizations like UNESCO and the French government who adopted some secondary schools as pilot schools to which they give French books, audio-visual materials and organize French workshops in other to motivate both the teachers and the students of these pilot schools. Moreover, it is a general belief that no one can be forced to learn a foreign language; rather it depends on individual's determination and perception of the importance of the language to an individual. In Nigeria, many of the students at the secondary school level; especially in public secondary schools do not have personal interest in French language. Most of the students either because of fear or shame refuse to use the French language as a means of communication because some of them still encounter problems with English language; hence the French language is being ignored for English as the latter is the most useful and needed. To these students and even their parents, the country for whatever reason does not need a second official language. To them, it is purely another method of colonization. With these highlighted problems facing the learning, teaching and the actualization of French language as a second official language in Nigeria, it is however concluded that the government needs to try every means to make the teaching of French language as easy as that of its counterpart-English- by providing a good, conducive and motivating environment for its learning; that is by providing adequate teaching aids and audio-visuals in schools; knowing quite well that these materials are either not enough or not available at all in schools. « Une très large proportion du travail effectuée sur l'acquisition du vocabulaire [même d'autres aspects d'une langue] concerne son enseignement plutôt que son apprentissage, » (Meara, 1980 : 239). [A great deal of effective work on vocabulary acquisition is its teaching rather than its learning].

More so, government should inculcate in the school curriculum an increase in the number of periods allotted for French language per week in schools at the primary and secondary levels; as it is done to English language and in addition create various avenues to motivate French language teachers in schools through academic workshops, seminars, in-service training programs and other reasonable incentives. The teachers of French language on their part should have a good level of comprehension and reflection that will permit them to be able to put the learners through the adequate rules of the French language. They should also endeavor to make the French lessons interesting and inviting to the learners through different activities such as learning French songs, acting plays in French classes, French quiz competitions in the classroom and audio-visuals to mention just a few. All the topics that are to be taught should be not be based on textbooks alone but they should be supported with adequate and physical teaching aids as it is believed that a learner may easily forget what he or she has been taught but cannot easily forget what he or she has seen. This is very important because the teaching method plays an unavoidable role in learning a foreign language. It is also quite alarming that if oral French class is given maximum priority, it will help learners to be eager to witness the next interactive French class. Excursions to French centers such as Alliance Française in Nigeria, Center For French Training and Documentation (CFTD) and African French speaking countries should be encouraged from time to time. Wellek and Warren (1973: 104) comment: "Only a person who has knowledge of a society from other sources than purely literary ones is able to find out if, and how far, certain social types and their behaviour are reproduced in the novel (and other arts, including composition writing)". Hence, teachers too need to brace-up and be alive to their responsibilities in the discharge of their work.

Conclusion

Considering all these ordeals faced by Nigerians in learning French language as an official language side by side with English Language, I would like to suggest the following points as possible ways to make the language acquire the same status as its English counterpart in Nigeria. For a language as complex as French, learners at all levels should be encouraged and motivated to learn the language in a conducive environment. Also, the Nigerian government should do all things possible to give the importance of learning the language adequate and wide publicity. The Nigerian government should endeavour to subsidize French books and

teaching materials; and make them available and accessible to learners of the language. It is also of necessity to equip language laboratories with various modern technological gadgets in order to aid learners' knowledge of how to pronounce the French sounds correctly against the English or other ethnic languages sounds. It is also worthy to note that for Nigerian learners to be linguistically competent in the language, an immersion program should be given major consideration. Learners of the language should be given ample opportunity to visit the French speaking countries(at least the French speaking African countries) often without any difficulty. Moreover, efforts should also be made towards the establishment of more language institutions (both local and foreign) and the establishment of policies on the principles of linguistic human rights which must be strictly observed.

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