

# TEACHING AND LEARNING OF FRENCH: IMPERATIVE FOR EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES, NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND TRANSFORMATION

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## **Abstract**

This paper seeks to reflect on the importance of French Language Teaching and Learning as a veritable tool for educational opportunities, transformation and national development. Undoubtedly, Nigeria's position in the world geography makes French language acquisition imperative for her population. It is no news that Nigeria is surrounded by French speaking countries. Nigeria is bounded in the East by Cameroon republic, in the West by the Benin republic, in the North it is bounded by Niger and Chad republics respectively and of course, in the South by the Atlantic Ocean. Apart from the geographical location of Nigeria, French language ranks the second international language taught in the world. It is the second official language of international organizations such as United Nations Organization (UNO), European Union (EU), African Union (AU), and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) which Abuja houses the headquarters. The knowledge of French not only offers educational opportunities but also offers international exposure especially that the world is becoming a global village. French language is very important in every field of human endeavour, be it commerce, science, technology, culture, diplomacy and so on.

**Key Words:** Language, Quality of Education, Language Education, French Language Education.

## **Introduction**

### **Language**

The word, *language*, has been defined in various ways by various language specialists. Language is considered as indispensable in human communication and interaction. The importance of communication to man is incalculable especially in human daily interactions. The value of language is strongly felt in every sphere of life. Politics and social policy can never exist without language. The functions of language in society cannot be over emphasized, as a vehicle of interaction, language functions as

an instrument of communication, and it functions as cultural identity. To learn a language is to reach out to others and maintain a variety of social bonds.

The central purpose of language is communication. 'Language is a system for the communication of meaning through sounds.' language is man's primary mode of expression.

Language includes a wide range of variation from a variety of human activities in a system of interacting with somebody, society, or culture. It also plays a crucial role in the social, political and economic life support of the people in a given geographic entity. Danladi (2005) remarked that, in spite of all perceived roles of languages to humankind, an all-embracing interpretation of it continues to elude us due to the complexity of its structure and the functions it performs. And that a useful definition of communication should include the feeling that language has been widely studied and acclaimed as the most valuable human institution and is indispensable in every domain in human life.

Crystal (1987) conceived language as having perhaps a 'magical', 'mystical' and unique role in capturing the breadth of human thoughts and endeavour. Brooks (1964) maintained that, it is through the magic of language that man comes eventually to understand, to an impressive degree, the environment in which he lives and, still more surprising, gains an insight into his own nature and his own condition. Through language, all forms of human experience past, present and future could be expressed. Ajiboye (2002) noted that, whereas it is possible for a man to pick up a language other than his mother tongue and master it to a good level of competence, it is not yet the case for lower mammals. In spite of the formidable level of multilingualism in the world it is possible, thanks to the power of the human mind, to be able to switch from one language to another and thereby reduce the scare of mutual unintelligibility. Accordingly, language is described as la *sagesse de la nation*.

### **The Power of Language**

In addition to the 'magical' nature of language is the Power of Language. Incontestably, language is known to be so powerful in human activities/affairs. Language functions predominantly in the declaration of wars, in making peace, in conflict resolutions and of cause in love affairs. It was through language that God created the world. And God said let there be light, let there be night..... etc. (Genesis 1:3) (The Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition). It was through the instrumentality of the power of language that Jesus performed most of His miracles. In Acts of Apostles 22:1-2, Paul had just been arrested and was to be killed but when he addressed them in the Hebrew language, they were the more, quiet.

Another area of the power of language was the powerful, emotional and moving speech of Mark Anthony at the funeral of Julius Caesar. "*Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears; I have come to bury Caesar not to praise him*". Language rules the world. It is the powerful instrument of language that great leaders such as Wilson Churchill, Abraham Lincoln, Charles de Gaulle, Chairman Mao etc were able to gain support from their subjects in time of difficulty. Furthermore, it is through the power of language that the greatest discoveries and inventions are made.

Language functions not only for communicating with other people but also with oneself because when one conceptualizes an idea it has to be translated into language before the idea can go into concrete form. We dialogue with ourselves in time of need or difficulty in order to solve problems. Galadi (2008) noted that language is a vital instrument for all human activities and it is the medium through which ideas are exchanged, social interaction promoted, national cohesion fostered and culture preserved.

In the same vein, Ajiboye (2002) stressed that when we study language, we are approaching what some might call the human essence, the distinctive qualities of mind that are, so far as we know, unique to man. Danladi (2005) reechoed this view when he said that, to learn a language is not only reaching out to others but to maintain a variety of social bond, a shared sense of values and communal awareness. The imperative of shared values of language is indispensable to general development of human society, be it political, economic, social and cultural values. Francois Hollande emphasized this shared value of French Language when he said at the opening ceremony of La Francophonie, March 20<sup>th</sup> 2015, in Dakar Senegal “La langue Française n'est plus une langue de la France ou une langue parlée par les anciennes colonies de la France mais c'est *un langue de partage*.” (Today French has moved from the language spoken in France and spoken by the former French colonies to a language to be shared by all mankind), that is, French is a language to be shared. This could be true because of the inherent values in French language.

Consequently, the teaching and learning of French language in Nigeria has made a shift from the language to be taught to Nigerians for the purpose of interacting with its francophone neighbours. French language is not only a foreign language but foreign and international language with its enormous potentials in terms of economic, political, technological, social and cultural benefits. It behoves Nigeria, an Island in the sea of francophone countries to tap into these unfathomable benefits by giving accelerated attention to the implementation of French language teaching and learning in its National Language Policy.

Much has been said and written about the importance of French in Nigeria. The language has played and continues to play some significant roles in the development of Nigeria socially, culturally, economically, politically and technologically. It is worth noting that its status has undergone a remarkable positive transformation. It has moved from non-recognition to recognition and from mere foreign language to a second official language in Nigeria. Furthermore, it has become a compulsory subject in the primary schools and at the JSS levels (NPE, 2004). This transformation of French language not only testified to the fact that it provides job opportunities but, the fact that it has become a core subject in the primary, secondary, colleges of education, polytechnic and universities.

It is important to note that, the teaching of French was introduced into the country by the first generation missionaries a long time ago but it has suffered a great setback in the area of teaching and learning probably as a result of defect in the National Policies on Education. This defect in the National Policies on Education as regards the teaching and learning of French has made education one-sided in Nigeria. For instance, the preference given to other subjects like the sciences and some selected

subjects like English to the detriment of French language is a proof of that lopsidedness.

Education is defined as the total process by which knowledge, ideas, facts, skills, attitudes and societal values are acquired or learned and developed. Education remains the most essential and potent instrument for individual and national development. Without it, it is impossible to achieve any meaningful development. This is in line with National Policy on Education (2004) which describes education as an instrument par excellence for effecting national development and that education fosters the worth and development of the individual, for each individual's sake and for the general development of the society. Consequently, the set-back suffered by the teaching and learning of French language has slowed down the rapid and total development of education in Nigeria. To say the least the neglect in promoting the teaching and learning of French language for a long time impeded on the quality of Education in Nigeria. This is so because, one would expect that Nigeria's project of truly being a bilingual nation (French as second official language) would be pursued vigorously by drawing up policies and programmes that would encourage its citizens to study French in order to benefit from job opportunities within and outside the country. Since the declaration of French as the nation's second official language by General Abacha in 1995, efforts at translating this declaration to concrete actions are yet to be felt.

### **Quality of Education: What is Quality of Education?**

The New International Webster Dictionary of English Language defines quality as, "that which makes a being or thing such that it is a distinguishing element or characteristic," "Degree of excellence; relative goodness or high quality of something." The Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary, defines the term "*quality*" as "the standard of something when it is compared to other things like it." *Quality* then means a high standard of something. Quality of Education then implies high standard and excellent education. Quality Education means relevant and functional education that is capable of making an individual self-reliant and self-sufficient in the society. It is therefore the education that meets or satisfies the manpower demand of the society. The National Policy on Education (2004) confirms this when it stresses the need for a functional education that would eradicate illiteracy and improve individual standard, enhances family status and the society at large.

### **French Language Education: What is Language Education?**

Language Education, as defined by Awobuluyi (1992), Amah (2009), and Odewum (2009), is the type of education which lays more emphasis on the study of language(s), be it national or foreign languages. Language Education is aimed at not only enhancing interpersonal communication and general communication but also for the purpose of training and producing professionally qualified and competent manpower in languages.

Consequently, French Language Education is a type of education that is geared towards the training and producing quality and competent manpower in French language which would be needed in education, industry, culture, administration, local

and foreign industries, markets, companies, banking etc. Other purpose of French language Education in Nigeria is for the training and production of Nigerians in the language to enhance international communication and diplomacy, to foster regional and international integration for peace and unity and progress. French Language Education does not stop at the training in grammar or in the four language skills (i.e. speaking, listening, reading and writing) only. It includes the opportunity in exposing the learner to French way of life and exposure to both French and Francophone African literatures including Nigerian literature, cultures and civilizations. It is important to note that, Nigerian culture, literature and civilization are equally taught in French Language thus, comparing them with other people's culture and appreciating them. This enables the learner(s) to be exposed to and be aware of the experience drawn out of this exercise and then enrich his own culture and experiences for the growth and development of his immediate environment and that of others. The skills, values and knowledge acquired will help in the development and the survival of the individual and the society at large.

These qualities are in no doubt in consonance with the objectives of the National Policy on Education of (2004). These objectives include:

1. The inculcation of national consciousness and national unity.
2. The inculcation of the right type of values, skills and attitudes for the survival of the individual and the Nigerian society.
3. The training of the mind in the understanding of the world around.
4. The acquisition of appropriate skills, abilities and competences both mental and physical as equipment for the individual to live in and contribute to the development of his society.

### **The Objectives of French Language Teaching and Learning**

These general objectives of NPE (2004) are linked to the specific objectives of French Language teaching. However, the basic objective of teaching and learning of French Language at the secondary level is to facilitate interaction with our neighbours, that is, the French-speaking countries. The objectives of studying French as outlined in the National Curriculum for Junior Secondary School (2001) is that, at the end of their three year programme, learner should be able to:

- a.) Comprehend French expressions necessary for seeking and obtaining solutions to his/her immediate personal problems and or satisfying his or her immediate needs such as attracting peoples' attention, asking for information etc.
- b.) Comprehend simple verbal presentations of events, plans and projects yet to take place.
- c.) Comprehend verbal narration of stories and events within their range of experience that have already taken place.
- d.) Use intelligently and appropriately, oral expression and structures related to the situation in a-c above.
- e.) Read correctly and with understanding including oral and written French, appropriate to the situations outlined in a-c above.
- f.) Produce in conventional letter writing, French Language activities in the situation outlined in a-c above.

The general objectives of French Language Teaching and Learning in the Senior Secondary School (2001) include:

- a.) To teach the learners to communicate in French Language through the systematic use of the lively communicative method.
- b.) To widen the scope of the learners' knowledge about the French and French speaking world.
- c.) To assist the teacher in his presentation of the subject in the simplest possible manner, in order to sustain the interest of the learners.
- d.) To encourage teachers to lead the learners to use French language as a tool for enhancing technological excellence in whatever discipline they may choose in future.
- e.) To encourage the innovative capacity of the teacher who should be able to improve on materials in order to enhance effective delivery.
- f.) To be the synthesis of past Nigerian syllabus as well as those of other countries and benefit from the experience of the past in order to fit into the present modern Nigerian contest.
- g.) To help textbook developers to produce teaching materials that will adequately reflect the communicative method approach in modern language learning.

The actualisation of these objectives will not only place Nigeria as the best country in the world having the best Educational Policy and implementation but will also give Nigeria the Status of an excellent and fast growing country investing on human development.

### **The Place of French in the Modern World**

Much has been said about the power of language in the society. We must not forget that French language also has its own place, power and influence in the management of the contemporary society both in the world and in Africa in particular. It is important to note that French Language and the contemporary society are inseparable as the modern world sees it as one of the major languages upon which civilization and technological forward march depends.

Battye and Hintze (1992) stressed that French is 11<sup>th</sup> of the world's most widely spoken languages coming after Chinese, English, Russia, Spanish, Hindu, Portuguese, German, Japanese, Bengali and Arabic. Judging from the above ranking, French does not attract as many native or 'official' speakers as a language relatively unknown as Portuguese or Bengali. Yet the world seems to feel its importance and its pulsations more profoundly than other languages with a higher number of speakers. It is pertinent to ask the following questions: what is the hidden secret behind the prestige of French? Why is it that many nations made it a point of educational concern, and probably educational priority to encourage its learning?

Ajiboye (2002) remarked that, French language has undoubtedly benefited from the accident of history as the effects of the Norman conquest of 1066 on the neighbours of France (particularly Britain), and that even though Britain's choice of

French today is not by force of political domination but by choice among diplomatic options. It could be said that the long association between France and Britain, first via war and later via diplomacy, has made it a matter of course to consider French language in Britain as part of its heritage. He continued by saying that, a clear indication of this fact is the overwhelming number of English lexical items that are traceable to French language and the early study of French in the British school system. For instance, words like ‘government’, ‘restaurant’, ‘rendezvous’, ‘grand’, ‘grandiose’, ‘letter’, ‘envelope’, ‘toilette’, ‘lieutenant’ and so many others are borrowed from French language. However, it is worth mentioning here that the influence and prestige of French Language goes beyond the (English/French words borrowing) its influences can be seen in the body of literary, scientific and technological developments in Europe that were traceable to France. At a time France became the centre of development in the area of the advancement of human quest for better, improved means of coping with the world that it was believed that Paris was the only locus of the intellectual pulsation of Europe (Ajiboye, 2002).

Undoubtedly, intellectuals like Descartes, Boileau, Rousseau, Pasteur, Lavoisier, Pieget, Voltaire, to mention a few, left their footprints on the sand of history. These individuals constitute important landmarks in human development. To be able to gain an insight into their works, to appreciate at first-hand their contributions, it is most economical to first know the language of the contributors which in no doubt is the French language.

### **French Language and Africa**

Africa holds the largest French colonies in the whole world. In the same way, Africa has a linguistic atlas, which leaves a big room for the French language. According to Kwofie (1987), French language was introduced into Africa as early as 1624. French has owed its continued existence and spread to a combination of colonial and cultural circumstances. Battye and Hintze (1992) noted that: “It is on the continent of Africa that are concentrated the largest area and the largest potential francophone populations outside Europe.”

The presence of French in West Africa offers an impressive picture of the weight of the language. In West Africa apart from the Gambia, Liberia, Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone where English is the official language and Guinea-Bissau whose official medium of communication is Portuguese, all the other countries are French-speaking. Ajiboye (2002) remarked:

It is clear that given Nigeria's self-proclaimed positive leadership role in West Africa would amount to working in isolation of practical wisdom to be indifferent to the presence of French in spite of its all pervading geographical spread and political status. It is important to stress here that the presence and influence of French in Nigeria cannot be over emphasised. The long history of France presence in Nigeria can testify to the establishment of French trading company in Nigeria. CFAO was established in 1902.

According to Ajiboye (2002), by 1881, the French had started to live in Nigeria. The trade relationship between France and Nigeria has become so intense since

Nigeria's Independence (particularly since the oil boom). France and Nigeria cooperation extended beyond commerce. It can also be seen in education, political and cultural domain, thus, the necessity for Nigeria to equip its population with the language for social, political and economic integration.

### **Reflection on the Importance of French Language In Nigeria**

The policy of language education of every country makes a list of some languages to be taught in schools in order of their importance and relevance to national development and international integration. For this same reason, the Nigeria's policy of language education has English with the status of official language and some Nigerian languages enjoying the status of national languages. The last group of these privileged languages, listed under the heading of foreign languages, includes French and Arabic. However, Bariki (1999) disputed the designation of Arabic as solely a foreign language in Nigeria. He opines that Arabic is partly an indigenous language and partly a foreign language in Nigeria. Looking at it critically, both French and Arabic occupy the position of the most important and most crucial foreign language to Nigerians and this was the reason for the establishment of the Nigeria French Language Village at Badagry, Lagos State in 1991 and the Nigeria Arabic Language Village at Ngala, Bornu State in 1992.

Another angle through which one can look at the importance of French in Nigeria is the geographical position of Nigeria which we have mentioned earlier. However, Okeke (1999), observed that for Nigeria's leadership role with the ECOWAS to be more meaningful, Nigerians should be able to speak the official languages of the other subordinate countries in the sub-regional community, which is predominantly French. Since the French language makes the frontline of the ECOWAS, it also makes economic sense to say that Nigerians should be the ones to learn French rather than encouraging the citizens of the French-speaking countries to learn English, the official language in Nigeria. Nigeria, as the big brother of Africa and particularly richer than all the French-speaking West African countries, it therefore, behoves Nigeria to be more economically capable of promoting the learning of French rather than making these other countries to promote the learning of English with their meagre financial resources.

Another aspect of the importance of French language is the economic relevance of French within Nigeria. Nigeria houses several French enterprises and these enterprises would need the services of professionals who have working knowledge of French language, but due to lack of Nigerian professionals who have working knowledge of French, these enterprises would be constrained to import such professionals, thereby placing Nigeria at a disadvantage in terms of job creation. According to Owoeye (2010), these enterprises include CFAO, SCOA, BNP, Total, Elf, Michelin, Peugeot, Fougerolle, SGE, Bouygues, SAE, SPIE-Batignolles, Degremont and BEC Frères CGG, GEOSERVICE, EIFFEL, BROS, ETPM, Ponticelli, TECHNIP, DELATTRE-BEZONS, Dumez, LAFARGE, SGE, etc. In fact it is believed that the number of French companies established in Nigeria is hundred (Retrieved from [www.france-nigeria.fr/nl/information-about-nigeria/french-presence](http://www.france-nigeria.fr/nl/information-about-nigeria/french-presence)).

From the above, it is therefore, evident that the importance of French as a foreign language in Nigeria is undisputable. Furthermore, at the 2005 National Political Reforms Conference (NPRC) in Abuja, the importance of French was stressed as contained in one of the resolutions that French teaching and learning should vigorously be pursued at the secondary education level because of its relevance in the West African sub-region and the whole world.

### **French and Human Development in Nigeria**

It is important to stress that French offers a variety of human development. Frantz (1996) drew a long list of the opportunities/benefits French language can offer to youth/youngsters. Reflecting on these benefits, Owoeye (2010) quoted Peal & Lambert (1962) thus:

A youngster whose wider experiences in two cultures have given him advantages which a monolingual does not enjoy. Intellectually his experience with two language systems seems to have left him with a mental flexibility, a superiority in concept formulation, a more diversified set of mental abilities.... In contrast, the monolingual appears to have a more unitary structure of intelligence which he must use for all types of intellectual tasks.

The acquisition of a foreign language like French according to Frantz (1996):

1. Broadens one's experiences and expands someone's view of the world.
2. Encourages critical reflection on the relation of language and culture, language and thought.
3. Foster an understanding of the interrelation of language and human nature.
4. Develops one's intellect and teaches him how to learn.
5. Teaches and encourages respect for other peoples.
6. Contributes to cultural awareness and literacy, such as knowledge of original texts.
7. Builds practical skills (for travel or commerce or as a tool for other disciplines).
8. Improves the knowledge of one's own language through comparison and contrast with the foreign language.
9. Exposes someone to modes of thought outside one's native language.
10. Foster a sense of relevant past, both cultural and linguistic.
11. Balances content and skill (rather than content versus skill).
12. Expands opportunities for meaningful leisure activity (travel, reading, viewing foreign language films)
13. Contributes to achievement of national goals, such as economic development or national security.
14. Contributes to the creation of someone's personality.
15. Enables the transfer of training (such as learning a second foreign language).

In the light of the above benefits emanating from the teaching and learning of French Language Nigeria will go in no small way to benefit in the area of economy, political and of course in enhancing educational opportunities and human development for national development.

### **Conclusion**

Researchers have speculated that bilinguals may have acquired some language abilities inherent in their bilingualism that enables them to possess higher mental flexibility. Owoeye (2010), observed that the fact that people who understand more than one language and culture can communicate and relate more conveniently with people of other nationalities and cultures, and that it is presumed that through the learning of another language and culture, people become more effective solution-providers especially in the area of pressing social problems. This is made possible because learners of other international languages will automatically be exposed to a wider variety of solution-providing mechanisms. Economically, Nigeria is endowed with a lot of natural resources, yet Nigerian population is predominantly poor. Undoubtedly, the factor militating against sustainable development in Nigeria is the low quality of her people's human capital. Prah (1993) and Bodomo (1996) remarked that, one of the low qualities of human capital is when the linguistic and socio-cultural dimensions are marginalized. In Nigeria, there are many international organisations having French as a key working language. These organisations and agencies have offices in Nigeria and would need workers who can express themselves not only in English but also in French. The ability of Nigeria to provide the work force is another way of creating job for her population, and thus, avoid massive importation of manpower from outside the country. It is our belief that the major challenge facing Nigeria in this century is that of human development. Countries that are regarded as developed are the ones that were able to attain that status because they have qualitative human capacity base. For Nigeria to join the rank of such countries she must pursue with vigour the teaching and learning of French. Nigeria lost the post of the Secretary General of United Nation (UNO) because Chief Olusegun Obasanjo the then strong contestant could not speak French language, which is one of the major working languages of United Nations Organization. Many other international opportunities have been lost as a result of lack of knowledge of French. However, with Nigeria becoming a member of *LA FRANCOPHIE*, Nigeria could be said to be on the way to the Promised Land because this move will certainly open a great wide opportunities to Nigeria in the wider international communities.

### **Recommendations**

It is time for Nigeria to wake up and take advantage of the opportunities French language teaching and learning offers. The world is moving towards multilingualism and it is a clarion call to counties to plug into this global demand. For Nigeria to fully benefit from the wide variety of these opportunities be it in politics, diplomacy, science, commerce, technology and communication, arts and culture, this paper therefore, recommends that:

1. The Nigeria Language Policy should move from theoretical stage to the practical and effective implementation of the Language Policy which will give French language teaching and learning a priority.
2. French Language should be made compulsory from JSS 1 to SS3.
3. Government should make French language a core GS (General Studies) course in all Tertiary Institutions - Universities, Polytechnics, Colleges of Education, Military Academies and Para Military Academies.

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