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**Language Policy Implementation in Multilingual Nigeria: French  
and Mother–Tongue Experience**

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**Abstract**

By all standards, Nigeria is a multilingual and Multicultural state parading more than five hundred indigenous languages existing alongside English language as an official language and French language as the defacto second official language. Choosing a national language among the existing indigenous languages has become a complicated issue and a subject of controversy among the diverse ethnic groups and stakeholders in the political landscape of Nigeria due to multiplicity and plurality of languages in Nigeria. One cannot underestimate the significant value of languages in the socio- economic development of a nation. Thus, this necessitated the formulation of language policy religiously entrenched in the National Policy on Education. Though the language policy is quite laudable favouring the promotion of the indigenous languages and French language as a language of diplomacy and international relation, proper implementation of the policy provisions and most especially the teaching and learning of French language in a multicultural and multilingual country like Nigeria still suffers tremendous setback. However, this paper looked critically at the major constraints to the implementation of the language policy provisions as stated in the National Policy on Education having in focus the advantages inherent in the multilingualism and multiculturalism to promoting peaceful co-existence and socio-economic development in

Nigeria. It was however recommended that government should endeavour to match policy formulation with policy implementation.

**Key Words:** multilingualism, multiculturalism, language education, policy, implementation.

### **Introduction**

Multiculturalism describes the existence, acceptance, or promotion of multiple cultural traditions within a single jurisdiction, usually considered in terms of the culture associated with an ethnic group. This can happen when a jurisdiction is created or expanded by amalgamating areas with two or more different cultures. Multiculturalism is the practice or policy of giving equal attention or representation to cultural needs and contributions of all the groups in a society. Special emphasis may be given to minority groups underrepresented in the past, as through bilingual education. Multilingualism on the other hand is the act of promoting the use of multiple languages, either by an individual speaker or by a community of speakers.

### **Language Policy in Multilingualism**

Unlike the advanced nations of the world that are monolingual with the exception of Canada with English and French, majority of developing countries of the world are bilingual and monolingual. Considering the pluralistic and multicultural nature of Nigeria, there are needs for national integration and unity of the diverse ethnic groups. It is commonly argued that Nigeria is one of the countries in the world with multilingual populace. Nigeria could be described as the microcosm of the world considering the linguistic density and ethnic multiplicity. Daiby (2001) affirmed that 25 percent of the languages spoken on the African continent are found in Nigeria. National Policy on Education, 2004 Edition (FGN, 2004) recognized the learning of the three major indigenous languages i.e. Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as a measure taken to integrate the diverse ethnic groups in Nigeria. A mention was only made of French language as a language of international communication and diplomacy which will enable Nigerians to interact with the francophone neighbours.

Nigeria is the largest black nation and one of the largest ESL (English as a Second Language) countries in the world (Jowitt, 2009). The country is a conglomerate of many cultures and languages which made the choice of one of the indigenous languages as a country lingua franca in the country very difficult. The country has an estimated five hundred indigenous languages of which Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa are recognized as the three major languages. The status of these three languages has been documented in the National Policy on Education and entrenched in the Nigeria constitution of 1999. A good number of the indigenous languages in Nigeria lack orthography i.e. they are yet to be reduced to writing. This is responsible for the reason why some of them have not been widely used as language of instruction in school especially when the advocacy for mother-tongue education has taken a new dimension. It has been admitted that the best way to teach a child is through the medium of the mother tongue or the language of immediate community. It should be noted that only about 65 standardized orthographies and three major languages of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba have documented efforts

of teacher education. The major problem confronting Nigeria as a multilingual state is identifying, developing and adoption of the estimated 400 – 500 indigenous languages for the implementation of the primary school curriculum at the lower primary level of education as stated in language policy provisions of National Policy on Education, 2004 Edition. There is urgent need to develop orthographies for these indigenous languages and subject them to thorough linguistic, grammatical and phonological analysis so that they will be good enough to be used as media of instruction at the lower primary level. Experts in the field of mother tongue education should also develop technical and scientific terms in indigenous languages so that science and technological related component of the primary school curriculum can be delivered in indigenous languages without let or hindrance.

English language is undoubtedly the official language in Nigeria. The language was implanted in Nigeria through colonialism and imperialism by the British colonial empire. It was formerly referred to as a foreign language (English as Foreign Language) EFL and later became a second language in Nigeria because a large number of Nigerians can communicate effectively in the language. Kadoni (1995) claimed that English in West Africa is no longer a stranger in the region's linguistic ecology, as it is now regarded a member of the linguistic family.

Nigeria is estimated to have between 400 and 500 languages. Each language is guarded jealously by each ethnic group and it represents the symbol of identity for each group. The issue of choosing a national language in a monolingual setting is quite easy and less cumbersome compared to a multilingual or multicultural environment where it is highly complex and controversial. In Nigeria linguistic landscape, it is quite clear that national language is different from the official language of the country. The national language as the name implies is supposed to be one of the indigenous languages of the country. Nigeria as multilingual state is yet to choose of one of the indigenous languages as the national language because of multiplicity and plurality of Ethnic groups. English language now stands in the gap between the national language and the official language because it is this language that unites the diverse ethnic groups in Nigeria.

### **Language of Instruction and Language Policy Implementation**

The aims of primary school education are clearly stated in the National Policy on Education, (FGN, 2004) to include inculcating in the school children permanent literacy, numeracy and the ability to communicate effectively. The goals of primary education in Nigeria being the foundation for formal school learning are deep rooted in the goals of Millennium Development goals (MDGs) which include eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal basic education, promoting gender equality, reducing child mortality, combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases and ensuring environmental sustainability.

The choice of language of instruction in the educational institutions is always a problematic issue most especially in a multicultural and multi-ethnic nation such as Nigeria. Ouadraogo

(2000) emphasized that education and language issues are complex issues in Africa because of multiculturalism and multilingualism in Africa. The case of Nigeria in terms of multiplicity of languages and cultures is exceptionally contentious. The language policy in Nigeria states that the indigenous languages of the learners should be used as the language of instruction at the first three years of the primary school system i.e. the lower primary. The promotion of the indigenous languages in Nigeria dates back to the colonial era when Phelps Stocks commission of 1922 emphasized the significance of indigenous languages in the school system. However, the introduction of formal education in Nigeria ushered in the use of English language, the language of the former colonial master as a medium of instruction. The use of English language as medium of instruction at all levels of education is detrimental to the promotion of indigenous languages and contravenes the provisions of the National Policy on Education (FGN, 2004). It has been argued that the use of foreign languages has denied an African child the opportunity for inventiveness, creativity and productivity because he or she will have to think in his or her mother –tongue and render same expression in a foreign language. Research findings such as Ife six years primary education project (SYPP) alluded to the fact that children learn and understand concepts better if they are taught in their mother-tongue. Language is said to be the vehicle for expressing peoples’ culture and the means of preserving the culture. If much attention is not given to the promotion of the indigenous languages and cultures, it could lead to language extinction and loss of cultural identity. The issue of national identity and national unity is crucial in multi-cultural and multi-ethnic nations such as Nigeria. The lackadaisical attitude in the implementation of the use of indigenous languages at the primary level of education in Nigeria continues to endanger Nigerian languages.

#### **French Language as the Second Official Language in Nigeria**

In 1996, former military head of state, late General Sanni Abacha, declared French as a second official language of Nigeria. The most important consequence of this policy is that Nigeria will be more involved in the international interaction most especially with the presence of many neighbouring Franco-phone African countries. Ajiboye (2002) affirmed that policy is a statement of intention and a pronouncement of perspective; it does not amount to the realization of the intention or actualization of the perspective. Attitudinal problem is a major constraint to the development of French language most especially in a multicultural and multilingual state such as Nigeria. People are sentimentally attached to promoting their language and culture and they see others who promote the teaching and learning of a foreign language as promoters of imperialism in Africa. Multiculturalism and multilingualism are not the creation of the past colonial enterprises in the African continent. It is a natural phenomenon which distinguishes African continent from other continents of the world in the terms of the multilingual and multicultural nature of the continent. Competence in a foreign language is expected to be a unifying force in Africa which is highly diverse culturally and linguistically.

French language occupies the status of a foreign language in Nigeria. This is the language in which Nigerians communicate with neighbouring Francophone African countries that share borders with her. Therefore, French language is useful for social, political, economic and international relation and diplomacy in the West African sub-region in which Nigeria plays key role as member of Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and African Union (AU). The importance of French language therefore to an average Nigerian cannot be over-emphasized. Ogunbiyi (2002) identified certain problems confronting the teaching and learning of French language in Nigeria in spite of its significant value to socio-political and economic development of Nigeria. Some of the problems include among others: shortage of qualified language teachers, inadequate teaching aids, lack of relevant textbooks, problem of multilingualism, lack of well-equipped language laboratories, lack of interest on the part of the pupils and lack of motivation for both students and teachers.

One cannot undermine the role of teachers in curriculum planning and implementation because teachers are responsible for bringing the curriculum in contact with the learners. The training and re-training of these teachers from time to time is highly necessary so that they can update themselves on the current trends in foreign language teaching methodology. French language teachers are in short supply in the Nigeria schools both at the upper primary school and the Junior and Senior Secondary School levels. Many schools that are willing to accommodate French on the school time table dropped this idea due to shortage of qualified French teachers to handle the subject. In schools where these French teachers are engaged, they are only engaged on part-time basis which makes it difficult for them to concentrate and focus on their teaching assignment. In addition, this term of engagement of part-time teachers would not allow much to be achieved in the teaching of the language considering its value and status as the second official language in Nigeria. There is urgent need to train more teachers of French in Nigerian schools and encourage them to attend seminars, conferences and workshops on regular basis in order to be competent to teach the language effectively. The professional competence of the teacher can either make or mar the learning achievement of the students. The professional competence in this regard incorporates the teachers' competence in methodology of language teaching and knowledge of the subject matter.

Nigeria does not have a clear language policy but it only exists on paper and lacks proper implementation. Successive governments in Nigeria only pay lip service to language policy implementation even though the provisions on language policy are well documented in the National Policy on Education (FGN, 2004) i.e. paragraph 15 (4) on the documents stipulated that government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the MT or the language of the immediate community and at later stage, English. The 1999 constitution (Sections 55 and 97) also made some policy statement about the various linguistic needs in the policy. The major problem confronting the implementation of the language policy as entrenched in the National Policy on Education, 2004 and the 1999 Nigerian constitution stemmed from the nonchalant attitude of school administrators to adhere strictly to the policy provisions by using the indigenous languages as language of instruction. Many schools in Nigeria sanction the use of indigenous languages either as a language of

instruction in schools or as a language of communication in the school environment. Many parents in Nigeria, even those that are barely educated or not educated at all, now prefer “straight English school” where their children are taught in English right from the elementary classes (Omole, 2011).

The linguistic ability of the Nigeria populace is on the decline from the older generation to the younger generation (Adegbite, 2011). This is due to government ineptitude towards implementing the language policy. The issues of national language or lingua franca in Nigeria still remain a mirage and highly controversial among stakeholders in education. English and French in Nigeria as the two official languages in the country create a diglossic situation. More or less Nigeria is a bilingual country having English and French as the two identified official languages in country. The extent to which French is used in an official setting in Nigeria following its declaration as an official language is highly obscure. But one can attest to the benefits accruable to the adoption of the language as the second official language in Nigeria. The benefits include among others:

1. It creates an ample opportunities for teeming Nigeria youth to get appointment with notable international organizations such as United Nations, UNESCO, etc.
2. Nigeria is bordered by some francophone countries whereby the knowledge of French language will facilitate trans-border interaction between Nigerians and these countries.
3. The seat of ECOWAS is situated in Abuja, Nigeria and the majority of the member countries are French speaking countries.
4. It will give room for Nigerians to participate in the world civilization because the world is gradually becoming a global village. The knowledge of a foreign language such as French will launch Nigeria into the global civilization.

The population of Nigerians that speak French is highly inconsequential. This could be the direct result of the negative attitude to the study of a foreign language. Yuka (2011) opined that a country might be a bilingual country while many of her citizens are monolingual. A good number of educated Nigerians are bilingual in English and their mother-tongue. The former is used in an official setting i.e. broadcast media, language of instructions in school, court proceedings etc. while the indigenous language is used in domestic setting or informal conversation. One may be tempted to ask this pertinent question in what setting is French used in an official setting in Nigeria for it to be qualified to occupy the status of the second official language in Nigeria judging by the Abacha declaration. Using the case of Cameroon that is always referred to as a bilingual country, Yuka (2001) showed that in Cameroon, part of illiterate population is monolingual speaking neither French nor English but their indigenous language. The same could be said of Canada also where the larger percentage of the populace is monolingual either in English or French but only learn either of the two languages in a formal school setting.

What we have in Nigeria as of today is what is termed semi-lingualism instead of bilingualism. Semi-lingualism is a situation where competence in the two languages has simply not materialized. Adegbite (2011) noted that coordinate bilinguals with good mastery of the basic skills of oracy and literacy in the two languages constitute less than 5% of the nation's bilingual population. This situation is highly critical and pathetic and calls for immediate action especially in the 21st century where the need for competence in many languages is a basic requirement to gain entrance into the culture and civilization of the world. Dada (2007) rather supported the teaching of indigenous languages claiming that it should be made compulsory from lower primary school level to the senior secondary level because the falling standards in English is not unconnected with the deficiency of the students in their native language.

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

The adoption of French language as the second official language in Nigeria is backed by law and legislation. The enactment of law or policy declaration is not enough to accord the status of an official language to French language in Nigeria. Government needs to be more proactive and responsive to the implementation of the policy by training enough teachers to man the teaching and learning of the language in schools. The number of French teachers in schools is grossly inadequate. It would be surprising to find qualified NCE teachers or graduate teachers in schools teaching other subjects that are not related to their area of specialization. Some of these teachers lack confidence in themselves because of their deficiency in the oral and written aspect of the language. The knowledge of the subject matter is inadequate and insufficient for them to have the command of the language. Other areas where the teachers are deficient is the area of language teaching methodology. The 21st century foreign language teachers are expected to be conversant with the contemporary or modern methods of teaching foreign languages. The traditional method of rules memorization and translation of text from the language of departure to the target language is no longer in vogue. Emphasis has now been shifted to communicative language teaching approach to language teaching where the learners are actively involved in the teaching and learning process through conversation and communication in the language while the teacher only serves as facilitator. The course book writers who had publish textbooks that are well tailored along the current curriculum and socio-cultural realities of pupils ended up being discouraged for lack of qualified or competent teachers to teach the subject in schools.

The French government, through agencies such as Centre for French Teaching and Documentation (CFTD) and various Alliance Française have embarked on organizing conferences and workshops aimed at exposing the teachers to the current trends in the teaching and learning of French language. Some teachers have also benefited from the scholarship scheme offered by the French embassy to attend training workshop in France or francophone countries where modern techniques and strategies of teaching foreign language would be discussed.

The teaching and learning of French language in a multilingual state like Nigeria has a serious implication. The French teachers are confronted with the problem of language interference. Interference has been defined as instances of deviation from norms of either language of bilinguals in speech or in writing as a result of their familiarity with more than one language. The teachers of French language are inundated with series of questions that border on the structure of French language which is not in tandem with the first or mother-tongue of the learners. The foreign language teacher needs to be conversant with the language background of the learners. Nigerian learners face a lot of difficulties mastering the structure of French language because they think in their mother tongue i.e. English and render the expression in French language. Teachers of foreign language should begin to see thinking as one of the language skills the learners are expected to master apart from the basic language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Suffice to say that majority of errors made by learners of foreign language are products of language interference and multiculturalism. The idea of exposing learners of foreign language to the linguistic environment where the language is used as a language of communication cannot be over emphasized.

The establishment of a Nigerian French language village in Badagry is not only to enable the learners acquire skills in French language but also to imbibe and appreciate the cultural values of the French people. The learners will not only be competent in the language but also in the cultural values of the languages. Since language is the medium through which the culture of a language is expressed and passed down from one generation to another. The establishment of Nigeria French language village could not be seen as a direct substitute for cultural immersion programme which is expected to hold in a natural environment where the language is used as language of communication. Suffice to say that everyone is a product of a linguistic or cultural environment. It is difficult to acquire the cultural values of a community in an alien environment where the language is not a medium of communication.

### **Conclusion**

We have succinctly considered in this paper the language situation in Nigeria as a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural state in Africa. The implementation of the language policy provisions as contained in the National Policy on Education, 2004 in respect to mother-tongue education and the implementation of the teaching of French as a second official language in Nigeria have been seriously considered. Considering the significant value of language to curriculum implementation and Education in general, there is urgent need for stakeholders in Education to make concerted efforts to re-engineer and re-address the language policy provisions as it concerns the teaching and learning of French language as a foreign language in Nigeria and indigenous languages in Nigeria as media of instruction at the lower primary level of education. Nigeria as a multi-lingual state should harness the potentials of additional foreign language such as French language in order to further unite the diverse ethnic and cultural groups in Nigeria. Suffice to say that knowledge in English language and major indigenous languages is not only sufficient for national unity and national integration.

### Recommendations

1. Government should see to the implementation of language policy as it concerns mother –tongue education and language of instruction at the lower primary.
2. The policy of making French language the second official language in Nigeria should be revisited.
3. Government should embark on training and re-training of language teachers both foreign and indigenous languages and deploy them to schools to make up for shortage in the number of qualified language teachers across schools.
4. Government should endeavour to match policy formulation with policy implementation. The idea of paying lip-service to the implementation of laudable policy especially as it concerns language education programmes should be totally eradicated.

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