

## **FRENCH LANGUAGE: A BASIC G.S COURSE FOR NNAMDI AZIKIWE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

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### **Abstract**

*French language is an international language and the official language of the four countries that surround Nigeria. Presently in Nnamdi Azikiwe University (NAU), apart from students majoring in French, the language is only taught as a service course to five departments irrespective of the NUC stipulation that French or Arabic be taught in our universities as one of the GS courses. The study aimed at stressing the need to include French as one of General Study courses for every undergraduate student of Nnamdi Azikiwe University (NAU), Awka. Descriptive method was adopted for the study and data were collected from articles, internet sources and interview. The finding indicated that some universities have adopted French as one of the GS courses. It suggested that French language be taught in UNIZIK as a GS course. The work was based on NUC benchmark minimum academic standards for undergraduate programmes in Nigerian universities (BMMAS) of 2007.*

**Key words:** *French language, General studies*

### **Introduction**

General Studies (GS) courses are not peculiar to Nigerian Higher Institutions, but are studied in all higher institutions world over. They are courses deemed necessary by the education bodies for the good functioning and positive development of the individual in the society. As a part of a school curriculum, the study encompasses all aspects of the world around us. It deals with politics, ethics, literature, language, culture, sciences, technology etc. The courses are made to provide a holistic and balanced education across the disciplines. GS courses are compulsory for all the students who are supposed to offer them. The courses are coordinated centrally and examined in the semester in which they are taught. All the courses are computed as part of the cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) of every student.

The general studies subjects are necessary requirements for the award of a degree. The aim of general studies is to produce graduates capable of directing projects in fields outside their areas of specialization in order to foster sustainable development. ([www.funai.edu.ng/general-studies-unit/](http://www.funai.edu.ng/general-studies-unit/)) .

The courses that come under the umbrella of GS differ from country to country according to the needs of the society. These courses are also reviewed from time to time. New ones may be added and old ones dropped or modified as the needs and trends of the society evolve.

The aim of this paper is to stress the need for the introduction of French as a GS course in UNIZIK. This is in consonance with Article 1.7.3 of the BMAS course description no. 7 as GST 122-Communication in French. In order to achieve this, descriptive method was used and data were collected through documents, interview and internet sources. The paper is divided into different sections. The first part highlights need for French in Nigeria, followed by its status in some Nigerian universities and in UNIZIK. The next section will present the imperative of the implementation of the NUC Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards and some implementation constraints. Finally we will proffer some suggestions towards the successful implementation of the programme in UNIZIK.

### **Why French in Nigeria**

Nigeria, a country in the West African sub-region is surrounded by four countries who share the French language as their official language. Nigeria plays a major role in the economic, social, political and religious development of these francophone neighbors and even beyond. However, language has been a major setback in the progress that Nigeria would have made in these areas. Fluency in the French language by Nigerians will enhance communication with these our neighbors and also go a long way in bringing about peace in the sub region and even beyond. French will not only help Nigerians to communicate with their neighbors but will also help them to contribute in world and political discourse and can go a long way towards creating a fertile environment for Nigerians to contribute in the building of world culture in this era of inter-culturality.

We recall that French-English bilingualism was advocated for all Africa in 1963 following recommendations by experts which met in Yaoundé in November 1961. Although Francophone countries took the policy of bilingualism seriously and implemented it in their schools to the point that most graduates in such countries could understand and speak English well, Nigeria like some other Anglophone countries failed to implement the policy. (Onyemelukwe 28) This simply indicates that the issue of French language is not new to Nigeria.

The present world polity encourages multilingualism as the world is turning into a global village. The countries around us Togo, Benin, Cameroon, Chad Coast, even though they are francophone have for long recognized the need for multilingual education and its benefits in producing the all-round educated man, in the building of character and in giving one a voice that might contribute to one being heard. They, as francophone, compulsorily offer the English language to their citizenry until the last year of their secondary education. Hence every educated man from these countries has a good knowledge of two international languages (English and French) and so can give access or analyze or use information expressed in these languages.

According to David Kilgour, secretary of state (Latin America and Africa) in his remark explained: `

Since the adoption of bilingualism, we have been better able to provide to the younger generations the tools and knowledge for them to excel not only here at home but beyond our national borders. This has allowed them to reach for the dreams and succeed in areas they may not have otherwise.[[www.david-kilgour.com/mp/Sahla.htm](http://www.david-kilgour.com/mp/Sahla.htm)]

While other nations are fast embracing the new trend, Nigeria is still in a state of ‘indecision’. On this Maxwell observes:

Nigeria as the most populated black nation of the world has been identified as the least advanced of all the west African countries in terms of the development in the teaching of French Language. Nigeria is densely populated, intellectually and materially endowed but it is quite unfortunate that the implementation of French language as the second official language still suffers tremendous setback (94).

People have increasingly found themselves working among multilingual groups, either in their own country or in foreign countries. Globalization which opens up the world has necessitated learning of other languages. Languages are therefore considered as tool of communication that facilitates interactions between specialists in the same area. (Mulenda Mubalama) .

### **Status of French in Some Nigerian Universities**

Presently, French language is studied in many Nigerian universities in the departments of French, Modern European languages or foreign languages. Most universities offer French as a major course. It is also offered as combined honours in University of Nigeria, Nsukka (French/German).

It is pertinent to remark that French is also studied in some universities as French for specific purpose. Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) Zaria offers French for Scientists, French for Social Scientists, French for Mass Communicators and French for International Studies. In University of Lagos (UNILAG), French is offered to students of Business Administration, Sciences, Engineering, Environmental Sciences and Social Sciences.

Following the NUC BMAS, in LASU, French is taught as a compulsory GS course to students of Law, History and International Studies, English, transport, Chemistry, Philosophy, Arabic and Portuguese. Others include Imo State University, (IMSU) Owerri, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam, Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike, Federal University Ndufu- Alukwu, Ebonyi State (FUNAI) Abakaliki. Some private universities in the country have also included French in their GS courses. Araromi Maxwell in an article on 'Attitudes of undergraduate students to the study of French Language as a GS course in Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo states that the inclusion of French language into the general studies programme in some private universities in Nigeria is a welcome development in the tertiary education in Nigeria. He also reiterated the fact that Nigerian graduates need to be competent in a foreign language such as French in order to boost their chances of securing a job in the labor market that is already saturated.

### **A cursory Look at the NUC BMAS for Undergraduate Programmes in Nigerian Universities**

Decree (Act) No. 16 of 1985 as contained in the National Universities Commission amended Decree (Act) No. 48 of 1988 empowers the commission to lay down minimum standards for all programmes taught in Nigerian universities. Consequently, the Commission in collaboration with the universities and their staff developed minimum academic standards for all the programmes taught in Nigerian universities in 1989. The Federal government subsequently approved the documents in 1989. (Julius Okojie, preface to the BMAS) According to the executive secretary, Prof. Okojie, the need arose for the review, updating of the programme. He wrote observed:

The curriculum review was necessitated by the fact that the frontier of knowledge in all academic disciplines had been advancing with new information generated as a result of research. The impact of information and Communication Technologies on teaching and learning and the competitiveness engendered by globalization were also compelling reasons for the curriculum review. (Preface to the BMAS)

According to the BMAS, the goal of the general studies is to produce a well-rounded, morally and intellectually capable graduates with vision and entrepreneurial skills in an environment of peace and social cohesiveness (article 1.7.1 p.3).

Interestingly enough, French has been clearly captured in the document as GST 123: Communication in French (2 units). The course description states thus:

Introduction to French alphabets and numeracy, for effective communication (written and oral) , Conjugation and simple sentence construction based on communication approach, sentence construction , comprehension and reading of simple texts.(4)

### **Need For French as a GS Course in UNIZIK**

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka (UNIZIK) started offering French as an elective in the Department from 1992/93 session to students of History and International studies, English, African and Asian Studies, Mass Communication. In 1995/96 session, the programme admitted its own students majoring in French. Presently, it teaches the French Language in the Department of Modern European Languages where German and Spanish are offered as electives in line with the world polity of multilingualism. French is presently taught as a major course in the Department of Modern European Languages and as a service course to students of Linguistics, English Language and Literature, Igbo, History & Intl. studies and Mass communication departments. It is also an elective course for the second year students of English language and Literature.

There is an urgent need for the inclusion of French in the GS programme of UNIZIK due to the following reasons:

As one of the courses laid down in the NUC BMAS, already implemented by some universities there is need for the implementation in this university that never lags behind in its programmes and policy implementations. In addition, French language is a necessary condition for globalization, information flow, sharing of information etc. Acquisition of a foreign language like French changes one's view about the world around us. Language for specific purposes surpasses the limit of academic purposes and provides the functional need of communication which will in turn equip our graduates with linguistic tools for effective adaptation to the international world. Maxwell states that the inclusion of French Language into the general studies programme is a welcome development. He adds that this boils down to the fact that Nigerian graduate need be competent in a foreign language such as French in order to boost their chances of securing a job in the labour market that is already saturated. In fact, in global market, language is power.

French Language can help to produce better professionals who can exchange notes and ideas with their contemporaries around the world. We believe strongly that UNIZIK can turn out students that are versatile and able to function anywhere in the world by merely introducing French as a GS course in the institution and making sure it is well taught.

For a very long time now, the Nigerian language policies affecting French teaching in the secondary schools have not been stable and sometimes are disjointed and lack continuity. From the National Policy on Education that made French language compulsory ,having being pronounced a second official language of Nigeria, to the 2008 National Policy on Education that pushed French Language studies to an entrepreneurial subject thus leaving it with less than a 2% chance of being selected by students. Even students who loved the language at the junior school level are forced to drop it due to the conditions in the policy that make it impossible for them. Unlike in secondary school where the curriculum is uniformly drawn and teachers are forced to comply, higher education is more flexible and relatively independent. Nnamdi Azikiwe is free to introduce new departments and subjects. It can, through this freedom it enjoys as a higher institution, right the wrongs that the previous governments have done to generations of Nigeria deprived of the opportunity of becoming international figures and better professionals through the inadequacies in the nation's education policies.

Change is constant and as the society changes the education curriculum also changes to adapt to needs of the society. Also the change that a government wants to bring into its society is usually built into the curriculum where the citizens are formed. The change should start somewhere and UNIZIK is the ideal a place to start. UNIZIK is located in the heart of Igboland. A people known for migration, Igbo people are virtually everywhere in the world and would benefit immensely from the acquisition of another foreign language.

Nnamdi Azikiwe University is well equipped to introduce French as a G.S course. The language laboratory in the department of Modern European Languages can be used to teach the students the practical aspects of the language. Also the Digital Festus Nwakor Library which houses some hundreds of computers can be better utilized to inculcate the language to more students by affording them the opportunity to access and use downloaded language acquisition gadgets that will facility and make language acquisition fun.

The University is a place for mature students as all the students are supposed to be above 16 years as stipulated by law. This being the case, the university only admit students that are rational and of sound mind. A good orientation as to what French can do for them is enough incentive to make them struggle, even on their own to learn the language. A good institution provides an enabling environment for the students to blossom. Nnamdi Azikiwe University can create such enabling environment with the structures it already has in place and the little more manpower it can provide if it decides to do so.

The university is a place of research and training. It is a place where pilot programs are experimented upon. The introduction of GS French language course tailored towards the professional needs of the students of the various departments can be experimented upon at Nnamdi Azikiwe University and the success or otherwise reported to the wider public for adoption, or rejection.

The universities in Nigeria keep on turning out thousands and thousands of graduates yearly. The number of graduates far outweighs the needs of the Nigerian Labour Market hence the perennial problem of unemployment that has become endemic. But Nigeria is a country blessed with a lot of human resources many of which are left to languish or tarnish here in Nigeria because they are underutilized. But the same cannot be said of every country of the world. Taking for instance the countries around Nigeria: Benin, Cameroon, Niger, Chad, these countries lack technological, medical and other manpower that Nigeria can provide. Whereas our graduates languish here complaining of lack of jobs, the counties around us are in dire need of such services but due to language barrier such services cannot be offered by Nigerians. UNIZIK can take the bold step of introducing the French Language as a GS course to all the undergraduates to enlarge their scope of operation by producing international and marketable graduates and help stamp out unemployment in Nigeria.

### **Implementation Constraints**

Judging from the present state of affairs, we want to outline certain constrictions to the immediate implementation of the NUC Benchmark in UNIZIK.

Lack of human resources may be considered as the immediate teething problem as the number of existing French lecturers may not cope with the extra load. In an interview with one of the renowned professors of French, professor Onyemelukwe, she observed that the slim human resources available can not suffice presently.

In addition to this is the problem of teaching methods. Presently, the communicative method of language teaching is being advocated. Incidentally, a lot of language teachers are not yet at home with this method. Besides, it is a method that requires a lot interaction and communication with students.

Acquisition of adequate teaching materials is also a problem. In this era of technology, a lot of inventions have been made to reduce stress in teaching but the cost of these materials remains an impediment. The use of interactive whiteboard for instance promotes language teaching and learning but the cost is exorbitant.

Another major challenge is the attitudinal problem of both the parents and the government. The government negative attitude towards foreign language learning has also led to the gap between policy making and its implementation. Some parents discourage their children from studying foreign languages such as French.

Another envisaged constraint is that of large class management which may hinder effective result. Large class in a language class has always been a problem as it provokes noise, rowdiness, inattentiveness and poor students' participation. Meanwhile, when we consider that some other institutions have succeeded, ours will not be a case. We therefore proffer some solutions.

### **Recommendations**

We recommend that French be made a compulsory GS course in NAU so that our graduates will benefit from the world of globalization and multilingualism. To achieve this, we suggest that NUC, as a matter of urgency, sets up an implementation committee.

We equally advocate the study of French for specific purposes rather than simply for academic purposes just as is the case in some Nigerian universities. In this case, the different needs of the students will be attended to. Teaching French for special purposes will increase students' motivation in learning when they realize that this may facilitate interaction with professionals in the same area in the larger world.

In addition, government should employ more qualified teachers to complement the existing number which obviously is incommensurate.

We equally recommend that the federal government should as a matter of seriousness and in the spirit of multilingualism collaborate with the French government in retraining more of the already existing French language teachers in the higher institutions. The programme should include acquainting teachers with the new methods of language teaching (communicative method and action-based approach) as well as the use of smart board. These whiteboards based on computer technology enhances motivation, improves students participation and facilitates the teaching and learning process for both the teacher and the learner.

More incentives should be given to the language teachers. Part of the incentive should be providing them with government sponsored holiday trips to francophone countries.

Provision of good language laboratories is also an imperative for adequate foreign language learning.

### **Conclusion**

General studies courses are aimed at all round development of the individual. It aims at producing an individual well fitted for the contemporary society. Because the society is in constant transformation, the subjects that come under general studies also keep evolving. The present world affairs make multilingualism an imperative for the good functioning of the

individual in the society. Nigeria has for long neglected this modern trend but can still make amends. Given that professionals and academics must go through the four walls of the university during their period of formation, the university becomes the ideal place to remedy the wrongs of yesteryears. The University being an independent body, capable of drawing up its curriculum without the associated bottlenecks created by bureaucracy, can from henceforth start reconstructing its curriculum to accommodate this recent trend. Though to an extent independent the NUC, a regulatory body that ensures minimum standards in the universities has stipulated the study of the French language in Nigerian universities ,it is only necessary that Nnamdi Azikiwe complies so as not to be an outlaw.

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