

THE FRENCH LANGUAGE: CONTEMPORARY IMPORTANCE, LUCRATIVENESS AND CHALLENGES TOWARDS DEVELOPMENT OF THE NATION

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Abstract

As important and lucrative as the French language is to Nigerians, it is surprising to note the lack of interest in learning the language in the general populace and the indifferent attitude of the government to the implementation of policies on the French Language teaching and learning. This paper tends to create better awareness of the relevance and uses of the French language to the socio-economic development of the nation. It highlights various rewarding applicative uses of the language in the media, advertising industry and recognises possible challenges to the French language acquisition such as linguistic phobia, inadequate learning materials, financial incapability and linguistic competitiveness. The paper is divided into four salient parts that border on the civilisation of the French, importance of the French language (inter-cultural advantage, linguistic passport, international exposure etc.), challenges of the French language, recommendations to the challenges and finally a conclusion. In rendering Nigerians more proficient in the French language, one of the recommendations made in this paper is that government should ensure adequate supply of educational and learning materials to all levels of education, experts in French should be motivated by government to review French curriculum at all levels of education toward diversification of economy and self-reliance. If implemented, both the nation and her citizens will progress culturally, socially and economically.

Keywords: French language importance, language acquisition, language policy, pedagogy, motivation.

Introduction

Various attempts have been made to highlight the importance and uses of the French language. While most papers focus on specific areas in relation to the language and its application to education, communication and business alone, this paper employs a bird-eye view approach in showcasing the relevance and uses of the French language in other areas such as the media, international relation, self-reliance, inter-border and international security collaboration, medium of wealth generation etc. It is the gap of information lacking to prospective learners and researchers on the language that this paper attempts to furnish. The paper is in three parts. The first part focuses on the French civilization to intimate about tid-bits on how it could be beneficial to both individual and the government such as using French as linguistic passport to travel to Francophone and French-speaking countries for various purposes like tourism, trading and securing foreign aids and grants. The second part centres

on the importance, lucrativeness and uses of the French language. This part deals with the practical application of the French language for educational, business, media, communicational and economical gains, as well as other not so obvious application of the language. The third part exposes possible challenges in the acquisition of the French language (insufficient awareness, public ignorance, inadequate teaching materials, inconsistent and irregular review of French curriculum etc.). The paper finally gives suggestions on how to surmount them.

According to Yekini (2006), French language is “the maternal language of France and which the official language of many countries is worldwide. It belongs to the Romance group of Indo-European languages that developed from Latin, spoken by about 300 million people”. The French language is the second most widely spoken language in the world (Yekini, 2004). As at 2016, the estimated population of France is 64,723, 200 (Worldometres, 2016). France is popularly called “The Hexagon” because of his six sides, and it is considered the largest nation in Europe. It has a surface area of 551,000 km² and 26 cities of not less than 200,000 inhabitants which include: Paris, Marseille, Lyon, Toulouse and Bordeaux. It has four (4) major mountains namely: le Massif central, les Pyrénées, les Alpes and le Jura. It has four (4) important rivers namely: la Loire, la Seine, la Garonne and le Rhône. It is divided into 6 (six) regions and overseas departments which include Guadeloupe, Martinique, French Guyana etc. It has overseas territories such as French Polynesia, Wallis and Futuna, Mayotte etc. There are four (4) seasons in France namely: Le printemps (spring) in May, L’été (summer) in June, l’Automne (autumn) in September and l’hivers (winter) in December (Simeon: 2004, Gallimard: 1996, C.F.T.D: 1999 & 2000).

The original settlers in the territory currently known as France were the Gauls. The foundation, on which modern France was built on, was essentially laid by the romans. The romans created towns, constructed roads and bridges, developed agriculture, commerce and introduced Christianity which is the religion with the largest adherents in present day France. There are six (6) pivotal periods of transformation of the Gauls to the French. The period of the occupation of Gaul by the romans from the 2nd century B.C, the period of successive invasions by other kingdoms and transformation of Gaul to France from the 5th to 14th century, the renaissance period that witnesses peace, unity and prosperity of agriculture and industry from the end of the 14th century to the beginning of the 17th century, the period of the French revolution that was philosophically defining and politically groundbreaking from 1789 to 1799, the period under numerous regimes of the 1st to the 3rd republic in the 19th century and finally the period of the 20th century that includes political and economic recession in France and the second world war whose effects are notable in modern day France (C.F.T.D, 1998).

Having adequate knowledge about the above information on France and her civilization will help Nigerians in the area of tourism. This is because weather situation is very paramount to individual’s health and being familiar with various weather and environmental conditions of France will help an individual visiting the country for the first time to know the right clothing to make provision for. Similarly, having a panoramic historical view of France as discussed above will help individual Nigerians such as businessmen, tourists and diplomats for easy location of their movements during the visiting period.

At least 20 countries in Africa speak French and only four speak English (Nigeria, Ghana, the Gambia and Sierra-Leone. The capital of France is Paris-it is said to be the most beautiful city in the world. The colour of the French national flag is blue, white and red and the currency spent is called Franc. France Independence Day is July 14th. France is known for

some wonderful monuments and products such as the Eiffel Tower in Paris, automobiles like Peugeot and Renault, companies like elf oil company, Michelin Tyre Company. The French are the best wine makers (especially champagne) and they have the largest range of cheese (over 300 types). They are well known in the world of fashion (la mode) and also in sport. France hosted and won the 1998 football world cup. Many scientific and technological discoveries, inventions and advancements are associated with the French such as Louise Pasteur for the invention of yoghurt and vaccines, in 1826 Nicéphore Niepce took the very first photograph, Madame Currie Marie discovered radium etc. (Yekini: 2001, C.F.T.D: 1999, Gallimard: 1996).

Importance, lucrateness and uses of the French language

Nigeria is surrounded by French speaking neighbouring countries: Benin republic to the south-west, Cameroon to the south-east, Niger and Chad to the north. So the first thing you hear outside Nigeria is “Bonjour!” This is what made the Nigerian government to upgrade the status of the French language in primary and junior secondary schools to a core compulsory subject in the National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1998. In addition, the 2004 edition of the NPE also state French as the second official language in Nigeria. This is to make Nigerians more interactive and integrated into the global village community.

As parents, it should be our priority to give our children a better chance of securing lucrative job opportunities in the future. No matter your child’s choice of career, proficiency in French is always an added advantage over others. There are very lucrative jobs and positions one cannot attain without proficiency in the French language. Positions such as the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ambassadorial positions and jobs in consulates, UN, UNESCO, ECOWAS and various international institutions, organisations and NGOs. Proficiency in French is relevant to the following careers; immigrations, customs, ministry of external affairs, the armed forces, security agencies, teaching, lecturing, broadcasting and journalism, translating, interpreting, religious missions, bi-lingual secretary, foreign desk of firms and banks, oil companies, expatriate jobs outside Nigeria among so many others (Ademola: 2013, Yekini: 2001& 2016). Moreover, if one speaks the French language, it would be easier to go to French speaking countries for the purpose of study, business or pleasure.

Applied uses of the French language for national development

The French language possesses uses that are not immediately obvious or common. Scholars and researchers have often written about the applied usefulness of the language. These uses are often associated with cotemporary global issues and topics. Themes of conferences and text-book titles are often adapted to probable uses of the French language. This part of the paper highlights several of these applied uses. Speaking on the usefulness of the French language to the vocation of Home Economics, Alice (2006) recommended that: “French language should be included in home economics curriculum so that home economist could broaden their knowledge as they access information on the internet from English and French speaking countries.” In area of agronomy and various drinks, France is very popular. For instance, Champagne is one drink that is well known in all parts of the world for celebrating personal and official occasions like wedding, birthday, workshops, and seminars. Thus, Nigerian Chefs will be more efficient in their work if they could harm themselves with adequate knowledge of various international food items and blend them with the available local ones. Also, such exposure will help Nigerian manufacturers and industrialists in local production of any French food items and drinks thereby reducing rigours of foreign

importation and payment of unnecessary duties. Such local production and exemption of payment of duties would equally ensure reduction in prices of goods in the market and more patronage by customers.

Still in the area of application of French for individual and national benefits, the language will help the local manufacturers to market their products for possible expansion locally, continentally and even internationally. This is because French would be an additional language, aside English, for advertising and promoting their products. In the same vein, in continental and international commerce and trade, French language would aid the bargaining prowess of the Nigerian businessmen in their business activities and interactions whenever they find themselves in any of the Francophone countries including France. According to Salaam (2006) “ability to speak French will no doubt help a lot of Nigerians and facilitate their trans-regional economic exchanges.” Corroborating this opinion, Odudigbo and Musa (2024:217) state that Nigeria’s location among Francophone countries makes the learning of French important. Therefore, to foster part of its development process, there must be a need to interact with her francophone neighbours for linguistic co-operation and bilateral relations“. In this regard, French remains an applicative tool to do business with their neighbouring francophone countries. In other words, knowledge of the French language creates a mutual environment thereby breaking a language barrier to effective business integrations.

The language is also relevant to hotel management as a vocation under home economics. A bi-lingual hotel receptionist should possess a good communication skill and language barrier should not create difficulties to communication network in a hotel. French is relevant also in culinary and catering business. It is popular knowledge that the French are the best cook; hence French cooks are highly sought after in five-star hotels. Most of the culinary registers such as “haute cuisine, chef, à la carte, menu, gourmet” etc. are French words. Knowledge of the French language is an added advantage in these vocations (Salami: 1994, Yekini: 2004).

On the use of the French language as a tool for national security, Ademola (2013) observed that since Nigeria is surrounded by several francophone countries and experiences daily influx of people from these countries, criminal elements are bound to traverse the borders into Nigeria. According to him “to have a proper control of security situations at our various borders, French language will play a great role. It will help our security agents in their inter-border monitoring. Similarly, it will enable them relate very well with their francophone counterparts, thereby boosting their collaborative efforts in combating crimes.”

Challenges of the French language learning in Nigeria

This paper has dwelled extensively on the importance, lucrativeness and uses of the French language to would-be Nigerian learners. Yet, there are several problems besetting the language acquisition. Prominent on the list of problems is the attitude of Nigerians to French language learning. Most Nigerians are not aware of the immense benefits of learning a foreign language such as French. Others that do know the benefits of learning the language are not adequately motivated to enroll for classes (adults) or offer it as a language subject in school (students). Another challenge is that of government policy. Though the status of the French language has appreciated over the years in the nation, yet policies on the language are not well implemented or sufficiently monitored (Yekini, 2011, Research and Publication Committee: 2010, 11-12, Ademola, 2014). Another challenge is that of pedagogy: teaching methodology and materials for language learning. According to Yekini (2011) “The methodology of teaching a language is indivisible from the needed pedagogic materials in the process of language impartation and acquisition.”

The place of the teacher cannot be substituted, if there is going to be effective, result-oriented language teaching. Many teachers do not possess knowledge of effective methodology, nor the experience in handling various categories of learners. Many are not qualified to teach the language. Other challenges include lack of incentives, motivations and awareness creation on the language by the government. Unwillingness of learners to invest time, resources and energy in the language acquisition, unwillingness of graduates in the French language to teach among others (Yekini: 2016, 24).

Multilingual nature of the Nigerian nation is another problem facing the teaching and learning of French language in the country. According to Ndukauba, K. N. N. (2020:6081), “there are 500 languages in Nigeria. Ethnologue says 525 and breaks the figure down: 517 are living, 8 are extinct. Of the living, 19 are institutional, 76 are developing, 299 are vigorous, 81 are in trouble and 42 are in trouble.” From this quote, it has to be indicated that of all the number of languages existing in Nigeria, three are considered major ones which are Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo. Their linguistic advantage and feature dwells on the population of their speakers. Thus, in most cases, Nigerian learners of French language are usually faced with challenge of linguistic interference both at oral and orthography levels. Because of their linguistic background, many Nigerian students studying French do find it somehow difficult to pronounce words containing “ph”, “sh”, “p” etc.

Inability of many Nigerian graduates of French to diversify their acquired knowledge for economic benefit and self-reliance is another problem facing the teaching and learning of French in the country. Instead, many of them do result their fate to only teaching career. As a result of this, yearly enrolment of students for the language, especially at higher institution level is always low. This is because many prospective learners are usually discouraged by the poor lifestyle and poor economic status in which several graduates of French already find themselves. Similarly, since many parents do not often see economic prospects of the language after graduation, they do encourage their children to study more popular courses that can boost their ego and image in the society, even when certificates and knowledge acquired from such courses still remain dormant at home due to unemployment.

In Nigeria, curriculum and syllabus of French language are not only faced by irregular review, but also its contents are not always tailored and developed towards grooming students, especially at higher education level, for economic self-independence. Instead, the contents therein are often targeted at making learners proficient in the language. French language experts and educational policy makers need to note that only proficiency in the language is not enough with instilling adequate applicative knowledge of the language in the students. In other words, communicative aspect for daily societal interaction only envisaged, but how to use the communicative prowess acquired during the training for generation of income. (Sani-Suleiman: 229)

Recommendations

It is not sufficient to list myriads of problems bedeviling French language acquisition without proffering solutions or suggesting possible ways of surmounting the problems and moving forward the teaching and learning of the French language forward.

Ademola (2014) suggests that the government makes the French language compulsory up to senior secondary school level, in order to sustain and perfect its teaching. Also, it should be made a double-major course at tertiary level, in order to foster seriousness and better academic performance among French language students. It should be given equal recognition and attention in terms of staffing training and materials. Additionally, Yekini (2016) recommends that teaching programmes should be tailored to the schedule of adult

learners. Secondly that teachers' teaching methodology should be more exciting and motivational. Participants should be sensitised to commit to the teaching programmes and invest in them. Government should create a mass awareness on the importance and lucrateness of the language. Government should train and motivate teachers in the language, provide teaching materials in schools, implement and monitor policies on the French language, in order to motivate graduates in the French language to teach, rather than seeking other professional application of the language.

Conclusion

The Nigerian society cannot run from the need to learn the French language. The government of the nation needs to recognise the benefits of learning the language. The numerous uses and applications of the language afford immense opportunities for Nigerians. Despite the challenges of learning the French language, the importance of the language merits that the would-be learners surmount these challenges and present themselves for its acquisition.

Nigeria as a member of the global community of the 21st century, cannot afford to be internationally mono-lingual, nor can it afford to be linguistically less attractive to foreign investors in this era of global economic recession. A move to render the acquisition of the French language easier by the government would be a move in the right direction and a move to be better equipped to tackle the challenges of the 21st century.

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