

## PROMOTING REGIONAL INTEGRATION AND COMPETITIVENESS THROUGH FRENCH LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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### **Abstract**

*Nigeria is an anglophone country surrounded by francophone nations. This is a consequence of colonization of African countries by the British and the French governments who shared most of the West African countries in the 'scramble for Africa'. The official language spoken in each African nation today, has its origin in the language of the colonial masters. The colonists introduced their languages to serve as a means of communication and as a medium of propagation of their religion. Language plays a dual role in a formal education setting: as a school subject and as a medium of instruction. In this paper, French language as a school subject is presented by showing its values in the different domains of human endeavours, namely: communication, commerce, politics and diplomacy, education and culture. The language was introduced in the Nigerian school system in 1859, but It was not until after Nigeria's independence that the government began to appreciate French language and showed some interest in its teaching by popularizing it in the school curriculum. They saw that French and English languages should be studied by the citizens to save Nigeria from isolation from their neighbours and the entire world. Communication is a vital factor in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and no country wants to be left behind. French language is a veritable tool for regional integration and competitiveness not only in West Africa but also in Africa, and indeed globally.*

### **Introduction**

Education is the driver for the socio-economic and political transformations of a society. In this regard education has been described as something more than schooling. People are schooled to accept a society, but they are educated to create or recreate one. Education can be explained as becoming critically aware of one's reality in a manner that ends with reflective action upon it. An educated man understands his world well enough to deal with it effectively. Obanya (2002), sees this as relevance in education, which he explained as having psychological, socio-politico-economic-cultural dimensions. Its focus is on individual learners in contemporary societies as

well as on the society, because the society is dynamic as there are changes that occur now and then. So, education takes cognizance of the past, the present and anticipates the future for transformation.

Nigeria also believes that education serves as an instrument for national development as stipulated in the National Policy on Education (FGN, 2013). A good and functional educational system begets buoyant economic, political, moral, spiritual and healthy development of a nation. The two instruments through which education can be accomplished for national development are essentially the curriculum and the teacher respectively (Offorma, 2016). Since French language was introduced in the school curriculum, Nigeria has included it in the teacher education programmes in colleges and faculties of education to produce the teachers who will implement the curriculum.

Language is a medium or form of expression, which can be verbal or non-verbal (Offorma, 2009). Thus, we have verbal and non-verbal language. It is a system of signs and symbols and rules for using them, which convey thoughts, feelings and information. That is why each language has its lexis and structure, stylistics, orthography and phonology. Language is made up of words, their pronunciation, and the methods of combining them, used and understood by a language community. Man is endowed with the capacity for language and so interacts with others through language.

Today, we live in a polyglot world which, in terms of communication and interaction, is becoming smaller and smaller each day. There are more and more political, economic, educational, cultural, social, scientific and technological exchanges, whereby people from different countries come together to discuss issues, solve problems, share ideas and future plans. Language is an important medium through which these enterprises can be achieved. Therefore, a cultivation of the language used by the bodies is necessary. This paper therefore portrays the values of French language in Nigeria and how it can serve as a tool for regional integration and competitiveness in West Africa and indeed globally.

### **What is Regional Integration**

Regional integration is an interaction between neighbours and states whereby they cooperate and reach agreement about their development through their common institutions and regulations. It is a form of political and economic initiative focused on trade interests to attain their socio-economic development which also includes security. It is organized either through supranational institutional structures or through inter governmental decision-making, or the combination of both. (Wikipedia Retrieved 2/10/18).

Regional integration is the process of combating the barriers that divide neighbouring countries. It is handled by common agreement, and of collaboratively managing shared resources and assets. More importantly, it is a means by which groups of countries liberalize trade, create a common market for goods, people, capital and services. The European Union advocates regional integration as an effective tool for attaining prosperity, peace and security. The Union sees regional integration as increasingly becoming an instrument for harvesting the gains and combating the negative impacts of globalization.

In the past attempts at regional integration often showed removal of barriers to free trade in the region, promotion of free movement of people, labour, goods and capital across national borders, cutting down on possible regional armed conflicts, and using cohesive regional stance on policy issues, like the environment, climate change and immigration. Regional integration involves intra-regional trade which focuses on economic exchanges between countries of the region or economic zone. Countries within economic trade regimes enjoy increased level of trade and commodity exchange between themselves; for example, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). This helps to reduce inflation, tariff barriers associated with foreign markets.

There are three types of integration as posited by McCormick (1999), namely economic integration, Political integration and single market integration. Economic integration deals with the agreement of different countries to remove trade barriers between them. Tariffs and taxes imposed on imports to a country may cause a barrier by limiting the quantity of products that can be imported and restrictions at the borders. For example, ECOWAS nations may decide to set up a free-trade agreement to reduce barriers between the countries. Countries may also wish to set up their own trade barriers on goods from other countries.

Political integration involves common policies such as in education, healthcare, unemployment benefits and pensions, and common political institutions that occur due to complete economic integration into a single market by the cooperating nations. The political integration occurs when the cooperating nations are so integrated that they share common foreign policies and merge their armies. In effect, they form a new country.

The single market integration can also be called customs union. It is a midpoint of the integration scale between political and economic integration. It occurs when the cooperating states become so integrated that all the barriers to the movement of labour, goods and capital are removed. The integrating countries share a common external tariff on goods from other countries, which

they set This may lead to a further step in the process of economic integration to operate a common currency with monetary policy regulated by a single Central Bank.

The above types of integration are needed for regional integration. There are regional integrations such as European Union, can only be attained if the cooperating countries share a common medium/media of communication.

ECOWAS is a regional organization focused on regional integration of West African States. It was established in 1975 and now has fifteen (15) country members which include: Republique du Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo, Cape Verde, Guinea and Niger. The last two were suspended from the organization in 2008 and 2009 respectively because of their Coup d'états. The major objective of the organization is to promote economic integration among the member countries. The organization employs three languages in their discourses namely; English, French and Portuguese.

French language education is the training of individuals to acquire the four language skills in French. It deals with facilitation of the learning of the language of the French people. The facilitation is done by a person who is well grounded in the listening, speaking, reading and writing skills of the language, the French teacher. This implies that a French language teacher must be proficient in the four language skills to be able to facilitate the learning of the language.

The language competences required for proficiency in French language or any other language is call communicative competence. Communicative competence is the essence of learning any language. Language serves as a medium for understanding ideas expressed by another person and for one to be understood by others. It is an exchange between the speaker or writer and the interlocutor. So language learning is not just a linguistic exercise but also learning of the culture of the people and so it requires both oral and written comprehension and expression (Njoku, 2004).

### **Competitiveness**

This just means empowering the citizens of a country to function effectively anywhere they find themselves in their different fields of endeavour. It is the ability of one to exhibit competence in ones area of specialization in any location one finds oneself. For example, a graduate in Education should be able to teach his or her subject of specialization effectively in any school in any part of the world, once the language of the community is the same. Today, we talk of global economic competitiveness.

This should be the focus of education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. One way of empowering learners to be competitive is to focus on the 4Cs in the classrooms., (Offorma&Obiefuna2016). The 4Cs are communication, collaboration, critical thinking and creativity. Learners should imbibe these skills to be able to function effectively in their environments.

### **French Language Education In Nigeria**

The option of the language to be taught in schools was determined by some factors. According to Obanya, (1998:1), these variables include:

- The historical experience of colonialism
- Political evolution after attainment of independence
- The socio-linguistic contours of each country and
- The strength of linguistic and educational lobbies in various countries.

These factors play some roles in the introduction of French language in Nigerian schools.

French had been introduced in some schools in 1859. French was introduced in the C.M.S. Secondary School, the first secondary school founded in Lagos then. It was only after independence that mere interest in French teaching and learning started but these were in a perfunctory manner. The most popular and common academic language in the secondary school then was Latin. Anyone who called himself or herself a scholar, especially in the Arts in the secondary school was a student of Latin, memorising grammar and vocabulary and translating a language that was rarely spoken. The traditional method of language teaching was in vogue then.

The very first challenge to French teaching was production of competent teachers to teach the subject at the secondary school level. It was then felt that the Nigerian Universities could save the situation. Therefore, the University of Nigeria, Nsukka and the University of Ibadan started a pilot course in French in 1962. One of the objectives of the pilot programme was to produce teachers who would implement the French curriculum in the secondary schools. Candidates who had no knowledge of French at all were admitted into the Department of French and they were taught through the means of audio-visual method in their first year. The second-year programme was mainly literature and courses on French civilization. In the third year, the students were sent to Dakar for summer vacation courses. This is what translated to **the Year Abroad** in all the Nigerian University Foreign Languages Programmes, today. It is known as the **Immersion method**. It is the best way to learn a language. The learner is immersed in the language environment, where he/she lives with the native speakers of the language and

learns the language naturally, through listening and imitating the owners of the language in their natural setting. Graduation is in the fourth year.

The Federal Government of Nigeria (1981) recognised the significance of French language in the school curriculum, but categorized French and Arabic as language options at both the Junior and Senior Secondary School levels. According to Awobuluyi (1998), no specific prescriptions were made in the policy document under reference for language education at the tertiary level of education, it being felt, presumably, that the choice of subjects at that level will necessarily be determined by the choice already made at the primary and secondary levels.

In 1981, French was upgraded to a core subject, but only at the junior secondary school level. Yet not all the schools were able to implement the curriculum due to dearth of French language teachers and instructional resources. During the regime of President Sani Abacha, French language received the recognition as a core subject at the junior secondary school level. This made news as the language had always been aggregated with the Arabic language at the secondary school level.

In 2013, the school curricula were reviewed and further uplifted. It became a core subject at both the senior primary school and junior secondary school levels. Currently, there is a move to extend the

### **Why Promote French Language Education in Nigeria**

Mandatory status of French language to the senior secondary school level. I pray that this move succeeds as that will supply the needed human capacity for teaching French in Nigeria.

Today, we live in a polyglot world which, in terms of communication and interaction, is becoming smaller and smaller each day. There are more and more political, economic, educational, cultural, social, scientific and technological exchanges, whereby people from different countries come together to discuss issues, solve problems, share ideas and plan for the future. Language is an important medium through which these enterprises can be achieved. Therefore, a cultivation of the language used by the bodies is necessary (Offorma, 1990).

There are French industries in Nigeria and the employers need people who have a working knowledge of French for the development of their market abroad. Even Engineers and other scientists are advised to learn French language to equip them well to appreciate, appraise and apply French scientific and technological achievements.

The Addis-Ababa Conference on Education and the Yaoundé Conference of 1961 recommended that Anglophone Africa introduces French

as a core subject in its school system and francophone Africa, English, as a second European language, as a means of communication and understanding between the people of these two linguistic sectors. This is important for Africa; more so as no African language is yet developed to meet this purpose. The two most developed African languages are Hausa and Swahili, and they are just spoken in West and East Africa respectively. French and English are needed for regional integration.

Nigeria belongs to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), African Union (AU), and other world organizations such as United Nations Organization (UNO), Organization of Oil Producing Countries (OPEC), and others. These organizations use the two most powerful mostly used languages in the world, English and French receiving second hand information from translators, in their discourses. For Nigeria to avoid receiving second hand information from translators, special attention should be paid to French language. Communication is always better from the original source.

In the economic domain, there are employment for bilingual Nigerians, who speak French and any other language. Many Nigerians engage in cross regional commerce, especially with the neighbours of Nigeria, who are all francophones. French is a crucial instrument in the promotion of business.

Membership of Nigeria in the international organizations has some political and diplomatic gains which contribute to regional integration. For example, ECOWAS employs three main languages in their discourses: French, English and Portuguese. Understanding of French and English facilitates harmonious co-existence of the neighbours and promotes peace and development. That is why Nigeria could lend her soldiers to warring West African and African brother nations as a big brother. These gestures are diplomatic, political and economic too. So why not promote French language in Nigeria?

### **Challenges**

French language education in Nigeria faces a lot of problems. These problems are systemic, environmental, teacher, learner issues. We have seen the trend since the introduction of French language teaching in schools. There are many issues challenging French education in Nigeria. They include: dearth of teachers, environmental factor, lack of instructional materials, negative attitude of school administrators, poor funding, waning interest of learners, and teacher incompetence. These challenges need to be addressed for Nigeria to enjoy regional integration in West Africa.

According to Awobuluyi (1998), although French and Arabic were elective subjects on the Secondary School Curriculum, both Junior and Senior, the Government is fully aware of the problems that are sure to attend the teaching of both languages in the nation's schools, seeing that they are foreign languages for which pupils will not readily find models to interact with on a daily basis. P. 6.

The environment does not reinforce French teaching and learning as the language is only spoken in the classroom. Nigeria is an anglophone country and many citizens do not speak French. This is a big problem. Teachers are not helping the situation as they accept to teach subjects other than French when they are directed by the school administrators to abandon French teaching.

Due to poor teaching methods used by some teachers, students see French as a very difficult subject and therefore abhor it. There is need to improve production of human capital. Regional integration is based on competent human resource and solution of these problems would facilitate the implementation of the French language curriculum.

### **Conclusion**

French and English are the two languages that can save Africa from isolation' (CTCA, 1961). West African countries were shared by the British and French governments. Nigeria is a member of ECOWAS, AU, and for effective economic, political single market regional integration, there is need to promote French education in Nigeria.

### **Recommendations**

1. French language should be made compulsory at the senior secondary education level. This will supply the needed human capital which is essential for regional integration.
2. School administrators should desist from diverting trained teachers from teaching French; and French teachers should resist such diversion.
3. Government should fund French education programme especially, that of the Nigeria French Language Village (NFLV), Badagry. This federal government French learning centre that is meant to produce competent teachers of French has been delisted from the TEFFund intervention to tertiary institutions. Whatever their reason is, the NFLV according to the National Policy on Education, is a categorized specifically as a tertiary institution, and so, should be benefit from the TETFund enjoyed by tertiary institutions in Nigeria.



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