

The Role of French Language in Developing 21st Century Nigerian Graduates

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of French language in developing the 21st century Nigerian graduates. French is a foreign language in Nigeria and has a stance of copious advantages as regards its pertinence in all spheres of life. The language has gained ascendancy among different international languages especially in Nigeria because of her geographical proximity with French speaking countries. Besides, French is the second most widely learned foreign languages in the world. This paper equally considers the emergence of French language in Nigeria and depicts its relevance which can be traced to the phases of economic, social, political, religious, educational, employment, diplomatic benefits and all the likes to 21st century Nigerian graduates. French is unusual in that it often exists alongside other languages in multilingual contexts; it shares with English the distinction of being taught as a foreign language in the educational systems of most countries around the world in which is not excepted from Nigeria. As a result of all these, 21st century Nigerian graduates are now kept abreast of the salient importance of the language, this is the reason they are committed to learning the language. Considering the nature of this paper, we are poised to concentrate systematically on the place and impacts of French to Nigerian graduates and to determine how the language has opened doors of opportunities to them nationally and internationally.

Keywords: language, foreign language, diplomacy, multilingual.

Preamble

Language is the primary mode of human expression and this delineates humans from other animals. With the use of language in its oral and written form, humans are able to communicate and express their feelings within the cultural norms. The potential of language in the private and public domains of humans indicates its centrality in the sociology and the economy of the society. Different opinions have been formed by scholars and linguists about the meaning and nature of language in a speech community. These definitions of language are wrought with some ideological and semantic differences because «it is impossible to find a definition against which we could not raise at least one objection (Elugbe, 1991:42).

The definition of language given by Greenberg (1971:156) sees language as something unique to humans. Thus, it can be said that ability to use language creatively as against the use of the same by other living creatures delineates human communities from other animal communities. In his definition of language, Greenberg is of the view that:

Language is unique to man. No other species possesses a truly symbolic means of communication and no human society, however simple its material culture, lacks the basic human heritage of a well developed language.

Another important deduction that can be made from the position of Greenberg is that language is a universal property of human quality and that every human language has the same utilitarian functions irrespective of race and ethnic nationality.

Sesan (2010:71) sees language as a mechanism of control. In his view, language is «the sole machinery used by man to manipulate and control his bio-cultural sphere and linguistic domains at micro and macro levels». Man is able to control his environment through the ability to communicate meaning through what is said in terms of order and instruction. Through the use of language, man has been able to maintain decorum and orderliness as against what is obtainable in the world of other animals.

Thomas (1971) is of the view that 'language is systematized combination of sounds which has meaning for all persons in a given cultural community'. The deduction from the position of Thomas is that meaning is central to the use of human language through the carefulness of the combination of speech sounds. Language, therefore, can be seen as a mirror of mind in a deep and significant sense. It is a product of human intelligence, created by the combination of words.

Sapir (1970) defines language as a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols, it is the tool significantly

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experienced. In essence, language is a means or process of understanding the experience, ideas and emotions of others.

It should be noted that language does not develop in vacuum; it cannot be separated from culture. It is part of the culture of the people and the only available means by which the members of a society communicate. We may say that language is an embodiment, a component of culture and a central network through which the other components are expressed. Ajiboye (2002) buttressed the above view when he stressed further that language is a critical element of culture through which it reveals its fascinating power. All these inform the goals of learning a language as the ability to use it, understand its meaning and connotations, ideas and achievements. This could be the reason why Ogunbuyi (1998) insists that language is the key to the heart of the people, if we lose a key; we lose the people if we treasure the key and keep it safe it will unlock the door of untold riches which cannot be guessed out from the other sides of the door. With all these definitions and meanings of language, as given here, it can be said that there are key features that can describe language and these are:

- i. Language is an element of culture.
- ii. Language is a medium of communication.
- iii. Language is a universal property of human community.
- iv. Language is used in spoken and written discourses.

Linguistic Ecology of Nigeria

Nigeria is a multilingual and multicultural nation with numerous indigenous languages, English as the second language and French, German, Arabic and other modern European languages as foreign language. It is on this note that this paper classifies the linguistic ecology of Nigeria as follows:

- (i) Majority Languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba)
- (ii) Minority Languages;
- (iii) English Language;
- (iv) Foreign Languages (French, Arabic, German and Portuguese, etc);
- (v) Pidgin

The attention of this paper is on the role and status of French as a foreign language. This is because French is one of the languages that fellowship in the linguistic ecology of the country.

French Language in Nigeria

The history of French language in Nigeria started from 16th century. It was introduced as a secondary subject in Yaoundé Conference (1961). This conference recommended the introduction of teaching and learning of French and it were to be taught and examined as a school discipline in Anglophone Africa, including Nigeria. This was done as a result of the great importance of the language. It is on record that the first French trading company in Nigeria was Compagnie Française de l' Afrique Occidentale (CFAO), established in 1902. It is also on record that by 1881, the French men had started so intense since Nigeria's independence (particularly since oil boom), that in 1993 the France-Nigeria chamber of commerce became a desirable necessity. Besides, there has been mutual cooperation and agreement signed by both France and Nigeria: The Guardian Newspaper, March 13, 1994.

Equally, apart from the companies mentioned above, another one was established in Lagos- Société Commercial de l'ouest Africain (SCOA). The expatriate employees involved in the social exchanges that took place. The companies were also represented in smaller stations and that was where it was impossible to live a separate existence. This is because the French presence was minute in relation to the British presence, it was only to be expected that the French adapted more quickly and readily to the British ways which has an effect on the African countries in which Nigeria is not an exception.

The French influence persisted in Nigeria in the custom of signing the Governor's book contained in a gate house at the entrance to Government House in Lagos. It was signed when you arrived from leave or transfer into the territory band again when you went on leave. These are the activities that were on ground for making French language a known language in Nigeria.

As a result of the values of the French language in Nigeria, the federal government of Nigeria established The Nigerian French Village in 1991 as an inter-University Centre for French studies. The centre offers a variety of programmes and services with the mandate of providing language immersion programmes include: certificate, diploma, NCE, university programmes.

Furthermore, the importance of the language cannot be measured, as a result of this, the late General Sanni Abacha in 1996 declared the new status of French as the nation's second official language. Therefore for Nigerians to interact effectively with francophone countries locally and internationally, they should not only be able to speak the language fluently but also be able to attend international seminars and conferences without much problem. The Nigerian language policy should make provisions for the following areas of communication: Internal communication, international scientific or technical communication. French is one of the international

languages most widely used in commerce, scientific and technological research, administration, education, literature etc. With the knowledge of French, Nigerians and Francophone countries will be able to work together in areas of science and technology. This however cannot be achieved if French teachers are not employed or if those employed are not encouraged to teach the language. There is a growing concern about the attitude of Nigerians towards the study of French in our schools. A good number of them are not sufficiently informed about the usefulness of French in our educational system or its importance as an international language. They feel that people who study French language especially in the tertiary institutions are slow learners, or a course for dumping students who did not pass their intended course of study. And therefore it's a waste of time studying it, but revise is the case.

The need for French in Nigeria cannot be over emphasized. Nigeria's geographical, economic, and diplomatic as well as her educational and research needs make it imperative for her to give adequate attention and to the learners of French.

It is therefore necessary to make Nigerians realize the importance of French in our country. Some government officials and individuals are enrolling for French studies in French institutions and private French lessons in the country and this shows that the need for this language is quite alarming, the language should be encouraged among youths, teachers, curriculum planners, communicators, lawyers, military, Para-military, technologists and other professionals.

French is an important language needed by the professionals and much needed by the 21st century Nigerian graduates. It is prominently known that right from the onset, we cannot underrate the role of French language in Nigeria because of the country, Nigeria, is geographically surrounded by francophone countries. In the North, East, South and West are Republic of Niger and Chad, Cameroun and The Republic of Benin respectively. The benefits of language include the whole mechanism of human communication with the purpose of achieving total understanding. It is the crucial component of cultural identity and the most prominent factor in bringing out a distinction from one culture to another. For instance, Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa in Nigeria which share different linguistic identity, background, culture and social life within one defined nation can still express their own different languages with full audacity. The roles of language include a substantial amount of people's historical experience, their thought patterns, and their world view. Language's roles are said to be related to the embodiment of culture leading to the depth of a person's reflection—beyond the practical necessities of life to such aspects of searching for knowledge, education and collaboration among multi-ethnic societies, In such a way, it revealed how language continues to operate signs and elaborate functions in almost all phases of Nigeria's life. Particularly unique position where it ranges in its usefulness in the exceptionally experienced in Nigeria is in the domains of politics, education, legal matters, mass media, art and leisure, all of which are typically carried out through the medium of languages, most particularly the so-called foreign languages such as French, German, Spanish and Chinese. Etc. Language is seen as an instrument that brings about wholesome exchange of ideas to be able to affect comprehension.

French language is considered as one of the most widely used languages. It is a foreign language in Nigeria. The language has gained ascendancy among different international languages because of its pertinence in all spheres of life. Ajiboye (1999) opines that French could be regarded as one of the most important foreign languages used by most countries. Most of these countries need to interact to form unified bodies for economic, political and technological advancement. In spite of the place French is yet to be given its expected recognition in the country. It is quite obvious that the language is now popular in the country since its inception right from 16th century, the relevance of French language in Nigeria cannot be over-emphasized.

Therefore, the role of French language in developing 21st century Nigerian graduates cannot be measured. Just among the inevitable roles being performed by the French language are discussed below.

UTILITARIAN FUNCTIONS OF FRENCH LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA

Since French is a language, it performs all functions that human languages perform. Scholars and critics of different extractions (Owoeye, 2010; Essoh and Endong 2014) have examined the utilitarian functions of French language in Nigeria. In their different theoretical and empirical positions, they argue that French, as a language, performs communicative, interactive, diplomatic and informative functions. These functions have impacted positively on sustainable human development of the country. The functions of French language are identified and discussed below:

French as a communication tool

The word 'communication' originated from the Latin expression 'communis' which means 'common'. Its derivation *communicare* means 'to share' 'impart' or 'partake' Inyang Abia (1988). It is the transmission of information or ideas from one person to the other. Knezevich (1975: 66) defines communication as 'a process in which a communicator attempts to convey an image to communicate'. Its essential entails the sharing of ideas, notions, feelings and experiences between the sender and the receiver of the message. Dalton E. (1974: 566)

defines the concept as the process by which meanings are exchanged so as to produce understanding among human beings.

Without an iota of doubt, just like other foreign languages, French has been a useful instrument of communication in developing the 21st century Nigerian graduates. The beauty of a language is in its communication, most 21st century Nigerian graduates are interested in the language for the purpose of communication. The Nigerian graduates who specialized in B.A and B.A ED keenly wanted to develop themselves in the oral and written skills of the language. Therefore, it is a language of communication among the professionals and amateurs. It is often observed that graduates who are not specialists on the language are still in need of it. This is because it serves as a means to keep abreast with other foreign languages apart from the common English language. For learning to have more than transient utility, what is learnt must be kept available to day to day events and activities through communication. French language serves as a medium of communication in seminars, conferences, meetings and diplomatic gatherings. In fact, the language is becoming more popular in Nigerian universities due to its inclusion in the universities' curricular.

French Language as a Tool for Economic Development

The relevance of French language to 21st century Nigerian graduates has been a topical issue in Nigeria since the sixties. Language, culture and economy are quite inseparable because of their intimate relationship. In the process of learning French as a foreign language, one learns French culture and tradition. A good knowledge of French language may serve as catalyst for economic empowerment and development for Nigerian graduates. The economic empowerment function of French does not solely depend on the contingency of Nigeria to neighbouring countries such as Republic of Benin and Togo that speak French as official language. Aire (1993:4) argues further that:

the importance of French does not depend only on the nearness of French speaking countries, France, the mother country of these neighbouring francophone countries, has long since realized the necessity to disseminate her language in Nigeria as well realized its importance to her economy.

Therefore, one of the principal functions of the language in developing the 21st century Nigerian graduates is to act as a base of commerce. Any graduate from Nigeria can easily venture into business with the neighbouring francophone countries. It is crystal clear that most graduates are now in France and in some French speaking countries for the purpose of trade and commerce.

Most Nigerian graduates are now aware of the facts that one should not solely rely on his or her course of study. The employment situation in Nigeria has never given any room for relying only on your area of specialization. Therefore, French can serve as a booster to one's dream forgetting good jobs in both national and international establishments and companies. Thus, in order to be gainfully employed, we can see graduates and non-graduates of French language studying the language. They, therefore, apply for a course like diploma and certificate courses-DELF, and degree despite the fact that they are already graduates of their different fields. For instance, there are some establishments that keenly interested in some people that can speak and write French, some of them are the following: Total Nigeria plc, CFAO Bouyale, Fougerele, Hotels, Nigeria Customs, militaries and Para-militaries, communication companies, communication (broadcasting), NNPC, Federal Airport of Nigeria, theatre and film companies, multi-national companies, ambassadorship, U.N. ECOWAS etc. The above mentioned establishments cannot do without the use of French as a means of communication or to transact business. It is highly judicious for the current Nigerian graduates to note that the mastery of the language will foster good employment for them. In most establishments, it is always included in their advertisement that the knowledge of French language is an added advantage; mostly if they are interested in both speaking and writing of the language. It is a fact that current Nigerian graduates are interested in the language as a result of the fact that it serves as an added advantage for them to get a better job. For instance, I was a French instructor in some language schools there; I taught some youths in service (corpors) the language, in fact, some of them are into professional courses such as: medicine, nursing, law, accounting, engineering, etc. Majority of them even asked for extra coaching so that they could be versed in the language. Therefore, learning French language is never a waste of time for Nigerian graduates.

Without mincing any word, one can become a teacher, the so-called father of all profession. The learning of the language can give a Nigerian graduate the opportunity to be an instructor of the language in elementary, secondary and in tertiary institutions. In Nigeria today, we have a reasonable number professors of French that are Nigerians. The language has really occupied an influential role in the formation of the national expectations and the integration of the nation and the neighbouring French speaking nations.

Diplomatic Benefits of French Studies

Closely related to the role of French language to develop the economy is that of political benefits from the

language. French is a language of politics; it is as useful as English language. Before one can become an ambassador or the related professions, he or she must have the knowledge of the language. This is one of the reasons that graduates must strive to have the knowledge and the culture of the language. Most political and international posts need French language, therefore; the knowledge of French will enhance the 21st century Nigerian graduates to fit in for the posts without denying them. For instance, chief Olusegun Obasanjo was denied of the post quested for at the level of ECOWAS simply because he did not have the knowledge of the French.

Equally, it is quite necessary to take note of the fact that French language is a language of conflict resolution and peacemaking. Language is necessary to promote absolute comprehension to settle the rising problems both nationally and internationally. Therefore, most Nigerian graduates are needed to be interested in the language in order to achieve political values.

Diplomatically, most Nigerian graduates think more than their environment, they believe that they need to press forward to keep their intimate relationships with the other countries of the world. Therefore, it is strongly believed that when they have the knowledge of French, this exposes the graduates to many opportunities that can order their lives better. French is one of the working languages of the European Union, along with English and German and the sole language used for the deliberations of the court of justice of European Union. It is the sole official language of the Universal Postal Union (UPU). It is one of the languages of many other international institutions: The Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), THE United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), The United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) etc. All these placed a priority in the faces of the Nigerian graduates which will give them the chances to work with these great diplomatic organizations and in order to order their lives better internationally.

Socio-cultural Benefits of French Studies

French language needs to be studied by 21st century Nigeria graduates simply because of its socio-cultural benefits. It is possible for Nigerian graduates to be keenly interested in French culture and civilization. Knowing its culture and civilization could bring about unity and solidarity. When one knows about a country, one can easily relate with the country, one can develop the economic transactions with the French speaking countries; culture is inseparable from a language. The knowledge of French cultural will enhance easy access to French speaking nations for commercial and monetary benefits. Socially, the knowledge of French will help to develop a great rapport with other people from French speaking countries.

Nigerian graduates can attend seminars, conferences and meetings in French speaking countries if they have the knowledge of the language and they will be able to understand the bone of discourse in the programme.

Buetas M.C (1976:10) Opines that there is no serious-minded organization political, scientific, philosophical or even athletic which does not have the ambition to associate with other groups, sharing its idea outside its national boundaries. Therefore, the language promotes inter-personal relationship among the speakers.

Furthermore, those who engage in sports activities need to know more about French. This will help them in their careers. The role of French in developing Nigerian graduates is inestimable. Most 21st century Nigerian graduates can plan and travel to France or any francophone country, there they can do exploits as a result of their knowledge of the language.

Educational Benefits of French Studies

As language is the centre of human life, French language is one of the most important languages that express one's love in the midst of the French speakers. It is also vital to achieve many goals and careers. For instance, somebody who studies French and works hard can become a French teacher. In fact, the language is very common in our secondary school nowadays; due to this there are lots of job opportunities for as many who study the language and willing to teach.

Recently, the rivers state government set up some programmes that will promote the study of French language and creative arts in its primary and secondary schools. While students of two secondary schools in the state are undergoing a two-week holiday training programme on French , prior to the French training programme, which is organized by the state ministry of Education in partnership with Alliance Française under the public private arrangement, the state government had earlier donated a piece of land for the development of French Resource Centre.

The state commissioner of Education, Mrs Dame Alice Nemi explained that the French training programme is intended to expose them to the study of French for the purpose of inculcating in them the rudiments of French languages in a conducive environment, equipped with adequate facilities. This enabling environment will develop their interest in studying the language in tertiary institution in the nearest future.

Conclusion

For any democratized nation like ours, to attain greatness, the issue of second official language should not be handled with levity. French is supposed to be taught and made compulsory right from the nursery and primary school so that it will not be a great burden or task for the graduates to learn. Though, it has been found to be very useful and its utilization is across the globe. Learning the language does not only give one added advantage but copious advantages to make somebody an international diplomatic relationship if there can be a rethink on the implementation of the language policy.

Equally, due to the tremendous role being played by the French language to develop the 21st century Nigerian graduates, we need to re-engineer the teaching and learning of the language at primary, post primary and as a general course in all higher institutions of learning in Nigeria in order to prepare various Nigeria graduates and professionals for the challenges of learning the language.

As well, for the role of French to be well implemented, there must be encouragement on the part of the government, by providing the necessary facilities for the teaching and learning of the subject and this will arouse the keen interest of our graduates to keep abreast of the language and the reinforcement in learner's environment towards its teaching and learning.

Equally, French teachers and lecturers need to be encouraged in terms of remunerations – they need to be well paid for them to be readily prepared to give out their best without being forced to do such. The government also needs to encourage this team in the area of organizing seminars and conferences for them both locally and internationally. With all these facts, we strongly believe the place of French language in Nigeria will be more prominent than that of before.

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