

APPLIED SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF LANGUAGE USE AND TEACHING IN WEST AFRICA

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Prof. D.O. Kuupole and Dr. Isaiah Bariki

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Optimal Activation of French for Specific Purposes for Human Development in Nigeria

Tuesday Owoeye

Department of French,

Covenant University

Ota - Nigeria

owoeye2005@yahoo.com

Introduction

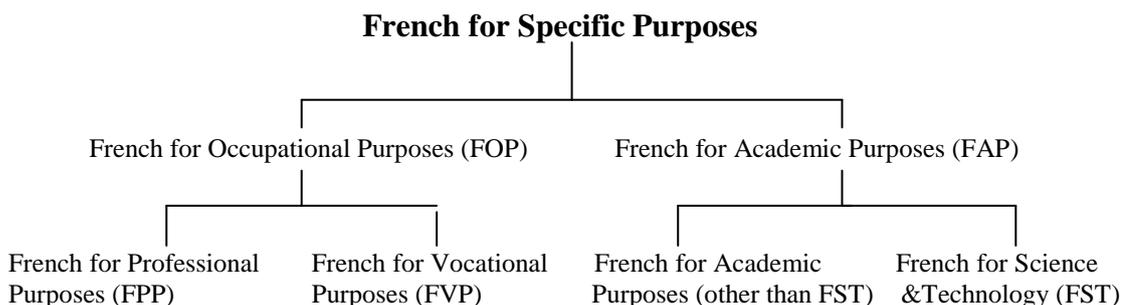
Language is one of the most important areas and perhaps the greatest instrument of human development. Human communication skills constitute the major characteristic that distinguishes man from other living things. More importantly, these skills also bring human beings together. Human development can only be sustained when people, individually and collectively, are exposed to new and greater opportunities that result in human potential realization. However, new opportunities arise only when human beings communicate with one another. For any meaningful and sustainable development, therefore, access to information is crucial. Since the main channel of information flow is communication the latter therefore becomes a preminent factor in developmental efforts. If effective communication is the taproot of development, then language related issues should not be toyed with since language is indispensable. Furthermore, language proficiency is considered to be a human capital and one can not ignore the fact that human capital development is a pressing need among Nigerians today. Premised on this background, it has become expedient to take an objective look at the status and relevance of the French language in Nigeria.

The advent of French as a school subject in Nigeria dates as far back as before independence. According to Brann (1997), French was first introduced in St. Anne’s School, Lagos in 1891. Omolewa (1971) gives the different date of 1859 at CMS Grammar School, Lagos. The exact date French came into being in Nigeria is not very important to our discussion in this paper; rather we shall look at the current status and most importantly an aspect of the French language which is known as French for Specific Purposes (henceforth FSP) and its relevance to human development in Nigeria.

Defining FSP

Defining FSP is better embarked upon through the various works done in the area of English for Specific Purposes (Henceforth ESP). The concept began with and was limited to English language for several years before experts and theorists of other languages began to look in that direction. In fact, ESP dominates the available literature on Language for Specific Purposes (Henceforth LSP). The reason for this scenario may not be unconnected with the status of English as the most widely distributed language of the world.

The term LSP is an umbrella term that applies to several different categories of language learning and teaching, which is rooted in learner’s needs. The categorization of ESP provided by Robinson (1991:22) is adopted here as a model for the categorization of FSP



The above schema encompasses two types of instruction: French for Occupational Purposes (FOP) and French for Academic Purposes (FAP). While teaching French for Occupational Purposes is targeted at individuals, such as pilots, hotel personnel, immigration officers, etc., who need French to perform on the job, French for Academic Purposes, on the other hand, is taught to students with the germane objective of equipping them with the common study skills, such as academic writing, listening to lectures, note-taking, making oral presentations in French, in order that they may succeed in academic settings where French is used for academic instruction. FOP, as shown in the diagram, branches off into French for Professional Purposes (FPP) and French for Vocational Purposes (FVP). FAP, on its own part, is subdivided into French for Science and Technology (FST) and FAP other than FST. This model, which can be applied to any language, clearly underscores the need for language teaching, which is aimed at satisfying specific needs of the learner.

The difference between what one can term French for General Purposes (Henceforth FGP) and FSP is that while the former – the one that is common in Nigerian educational settings today – is designed to equip students with both linguistic and communicative competence of French, French for specific purposes is essentially to equip learners with communicative competence in a specified discipline. This line of demarcation was more clearly made by Strevens (1988) and Dudley-Evans (1998) in their absolute and variable characteristics of ESP. The characterization may be applied to the FSP situation:

I. Absolute characteristics:

- designed to meet specified needs of the learner;
- related in content (i.e. in its themes and topics) to particular disciplines, occupations and activities.
- centred on the language (grammar, lexis, register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to the identified activities.
- in contrast with General French.

II. Variable characteristics:

- restricted as to the language skills to be learned (e.g. reading only)
- may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of general French
- is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation. It could, however, be for learners at secondary school level.

From the absolute and variable characteristics above, one sees FSP as a paradigm of language learning which gives priority to the acquisition of communicative competence (Canal and Swain, 1980; Moirand, 1982) and according to Chanier (1996), it is in the Language for Specific Purposes that the theory of communicative approach to second language acquisition can best be put to use since learners of LSP would not necessarily go into the details of the linguistic aspect of the language in question. Drawing from the source, which is ESP, several languages of the world are now having their own version of LSP. Thus, we now have German for specific Purposes (GSP), Arabic for Specific Purposes (ASP), Spanish for Specific Purposes (SSP), Portuguese for Specific Purposes (PSP) etc. Having defined French for Specific Purposes, we shall now proceed to examine the relevance of French in Nigeria, and subsequently the relevance of FSP to human development.

Reflection on the importance of French in Nigeria

The policy of language education of every country makes a list of some languages to be taught in schools in order of their importance and relevance to national development and international cooperation. For this same reason, Nigeria's policy of language education has English with the status

of official language and some Nigerian languages enjoying the status of national languages. The last group of privileged languages, listed under the heading of foreign languages includes French and Arabic. However, Bariki (1999) disputes the designation of Arabic as solely a foreign language in Nigeria. He opines that Arabic is partly an indigenous language and partly a foreign language in Nigeria. Looking at it critically, both French and Arabic occupy the position of the most important and crucial foreign languages for Nigerians and this was the reason for the establishment of the Nigeria French Language Village at Badagry, Lagos State in 1991 and the Nigeria Arabic Language Village at Ngala, Bornu State in 1992.

In analysing the factors that are responsible for the choice of a foreign language to be taught in schools in any given country, Ajiboye, cited by Bariki (1999), suggested four factors. We shall analyse the basis for the prestigious position of French as the first foreign language in Nigeria in terms of the factors which are the following:

1. geographical neighbourhood
2. diplomacy
3. technological advancement
4. global interdependence

While one can conveniently say that French satisfies all the four conditions, the same cannot be said of Arabic. French is the official language of Nigeria's neighbours: Benin, Niger, and Cameroon. Arabic is not. Both French and Arabic are languages of diplomacy; therefore both satisfy the second condition. However, while French is a mother tongue and official language of highly technologically advanced nations such as France, Canada and Belgium, none of the Arabic speaking nations is celebrated as a technologically advanced nation. Both languages satisfy the condition of global interdependence because the emerging globalized world demands international rapprochement. This analysis shows that French meets all the four conditions while Arabic meets only two. When the identified factors are applied to the Nigerian context, French appears as the most relevant foreign language, hence an incontrovertible choice.

Another angle from which one can look at the importance of French in Nigeria is the position of Nigeria within the West African sub-region. This angle can be termed the regional factor, which is not expressly covered by the four factors identified by Ajiboye. According to Okeke (1999), Nigeria's leadership role within ECOWAS would be more meaningful when Nigerians are able to speak the official languages of the other member countries in the sub-regional community. Out of the fifteen countries that make up ECOWAS, eight are French-speaking, five are English-speaking leaving only two as Portuguese-speaking. For being the official language of eight out of fifteen countries, French enjoys the status of simple majority with 53%. It is therefore the frontline language of the ECOWAS. It also makes economic sense to say that Nigerians should be the ones to learn French rather than encouraging the citizens of the French-speaking countries to learn English, the official language in Nigeria. Nigeria as the big brother of Africa in general and West Africa in particular is richer than all the French-speaking West African countries put together. By implication, Nigeria is supposed to be more economically capable of promoting the learning of French rather than making these other countries to promote the learning of English with their meagre financial resources.

The economic relevance of French within Nigeria is another aspect that one cannot ignore when analysing the importance of the language. There are several French enterprises operating in Nigeria that would need the services of professionals who possess a working knowledge of French. These enterprises include Lafarge, CFAO, SCOA, BNP, Total, Elf, Michelin, Peugeot, Fougere, SGE, Bouygues, SAE, SPIE-Batignolles, Degremont and BEC Frères. A more comprehensive list of these enterprises can be found in the web site of the French Senate at <http://www.senat.fr/index.html>.

When all the foregoing factors are taken into account, the importance of French as a foreign language in Nigeria appears indispensable. During the National Political Reforms Conference (NPRC) which took place in 2005 in Abuja, this importance was recognized and one of the resolutions contained in the report presented to the then President Olusegun Obasanjo was that French teaching should be vigorously pursued at the secondary education level because of its relevance in the West

African sub-region. Having established some of the factors that make French an important language in Nigeria, we need a result-oriented approach to determine the appropriate kind of French for acquisition and use by Nigerians. This brings us to the central point of this paper, which is FSP and human development in Nigeria.

FSP and Human Development in Nigeria

Before analyzing the specific impact FSP can have on human development in Nigeria, we shall first of all examine the general benefits of being able to communicate in an internationally relevant foreign language. Frantz (1996) enumerates 17 benefits that the knowledge of a foreign language can bring to a person. We have reduced the seventeen benefits to 15 considering 2 as repetitive. The acquisition of a foreign language, according to him,

1. broadens one's experiences and expands one's view of the world;
2. encourages critical reflection on the relation of language and culture, language and thought;
3. fosters an understanding of the interrelation of language and human nature;
4. develops one's intellect and teaches him how to learn;
5. teaches and encourages respect for other peoples;
6. contributes to cultural awareness and literacy, such as knowledge of original texts;
7. builds practical skills (for travel or commerce or as a tool for other disciplines);
8. improves the knowledge of one's own language through comparison and contrast with the foreign language;
9. exposes one to modes of thought outside of one's native language;
10. fosters a sense of relevant past, both cultural and linguistic;
11. balances content and skill (rather than content versus skill);
12. expands opportunities for meaningful leisure activity (travel, reading, viewing foreign language films);
13. contributes to achievement of national goals, such as economic development or national security;
14. contributes to the creation of one's personality;
15. enables the transfer of training (such as learning a second foreign language).

Taking a critical look at the benefits listed above, one could suggest that a Nigerian with a knowledge of French is better positioned to succeed at work and in life than his or her fellow countryman/countrywoman who understands only English and probably one other local language. An internationally bilingual person appears to have more access to information than someone who is competent only in one international language. Learning a foreign language, like travel, is a veritable avenue to broaden one's horizons. It enhances opportunities not only in one's vocation or profession but also in one's intellectual pursuits and ability to share and work with others. With globalization becoming the order of the day, people are increasingly realizing the need to be in touch with realities expressed in the languages and cultures of other people in the world. The 21st century appears to have brought with it an increased awareness of global interdependence and multilateral needs.

Apart from the above-mentioned dividends accruable to a Nigerian learner of French, many investigations in bilingual education and cognitive psychology have long also suggested that foreign language study generally stimulates the cognitive development of the brain (Peal & Lambert, 1962; Diaz, 1983; Commins, 1984; McLaughlin, 1984; Weatherford (1986). Peal & Lambert (1962:20), for instance, found out that a person with experiences in two cultures has an advantage over another person with a monolingual experience. According to them:

Intellectually his experience with two language systems seems to have left him with a mental flexibility, a superiority in concept formation, a more diversified set of mental abilities. . . . In contrast, the monolingual appears to have a more unitary structure of intelligence which he must use for all types of intellectual tasks.

This singular discovery has led some researchers to speculate that bilinguals may have acquired some language abilities inherent in their bilingualism that enables them to possess higher mental flexibility. Coupled with the fact that people who understand more than one language and culture can communicate and relate more conveniently with people of other nationalities and cultures, it is presumably possible that through the learning of another language and culture, people become more effective solution-providers especially in the area of pressing social problems. This is made possible because learners of other international languages will automatically be exposed to a wider variety of solution-providing mechanisms. If the learning of a foreign language can stimulate the development of the brain and also make one become a solution-provider, then one can rightly say that Nigeria stands to gain from the optimal activation of FSP in the country.

Economically speaking and in terms of the deposition of natural resources, Nigeria is considered to be the richest country in Africa. Ironically the Nigerian people are still predominantly very poor. If Nigeria is blessed with various natural resources while her people are still very poor, then her human resources paradigm must be responsible. We are of the opinion that the most prominent factor militating against sustainable development in Nigeria today is the low quality of her people's human capital. In attempts to discuss underdevelopment of African nations generally, the tendencies have been to calculate the GDP, the GNP, the Income per capita and other economic indicators while largely ignoring the human capital angle of development. And even where the human capital is discussed, as noted by Prah (1993) and Bodom (1996b), the linguistic and socio-cultural dimensions are often marginalized. If human capital development is critical to sustainable development in Nigeria as it is the case of other African countries, it seems proper to suggest that language issues must be taken into consideration. The recognition of the potency of language as a human capital par excellence has led to the development of an interdisciplinary field known as Language Economics bringing together on a common platform economists and linguists (Schultz, 1962). Chiswick (2008:2) defines it as "*the study of the determinants and consequences of language proficiency using the methodology and tools of economics.*" Since the advent of this emerging field of study, many theoretical and empirical works have been carried out to authenticate the noble place of language skills and proficiency in the microeconomic status of individuals (Marschak, 1965; Carliner, 1981; McManus; Trainer, 1988; Grin, 1996, 2003 Bruthiaux, 2003, Chiswick, 2008). Language proficiency is a human capital because it is characterized by the three indicators of human capital: it is productive, costly to produce, and embodied in the person. Looking at the strategic position the French language occupies in Nigeria among other relevant foreign languages, qualitative human capital development will not only be boosted but will equally be sustained in the country if Nigerians have easy, result-oriented and proactive access to the learning of the language.

Having looked at the macrocosmic perspective, one considers it also expedient to examine the microcosmic dimension of the relevance of French to Nigerians. Within Nigeria, there are many international organisations having French as a key working language. Many of these organisations, including their agencies, have offices in Nigeria and would definitely need workers who can express themselves not only in English but also in French. For instance, the international secretariat of ECOWAS is located in Abuja and anybody desiring to work in the secretariat is expected to have a working knowledge of French to be able to get employed there. Occasionally, ECOWAS and other international organisations having offices in Nigeria place job adverts in the National dailies requiring professionals (Accountants, Engineers, Secretaries, Economists, Lawyers etc) with a working knowledge of French language.

Apart from these international organisations, France is a frontline trade partner of Nigeria. This bilateral economic relationship requires bilingual English-French personnel who will become active players in the trading activities. As observed earlier, there are many French companies in Nigeria operating in almost all the sectors of the economy. These companies are in energy sector, banking sector, construction sector, distribution sector etc. Nigerian professionals with knowledge of French will easily get job in these companies. Another dimension to the relevance of French language in Nigeria today is the fact that some Nigeria-based companies now have branches of their operations in neighbouring French-speaking countries and are in need of Nigerian professionals who will be able to

work in those countries. It goes without saying, therefore, that Nigerian professionals who can speak and write French as it relates to their professions are going to have the upper hand over their counterparts who speak only English as far as job prospects are concerned.

Conclusion

It is our belief that the major challenge facing Nigeria in the 21st century is that of human development. Countries that are regarded as developed today were able to attain that status because they have a qualitative human capacity base. For Nigeria to join this committee of developed nations, several developmental approaches have to be deployed. In our candid opinion, French learning for specific purposes is an area that needs to be explored in Nigeria's educational settings for a sustainable human development. Looking at all the benefits – microcosmic and macrocosmic – of French language that have been discussed in this paper one could come to a conclusion that the status of French in Nigeria needs to be re-examined and its teaching re-orientated to meet the 21st century need of foreign languages. Though, there will always be the need to have a good number of Nigerians to specialize in the area of French language and French literature as disciplines, there is a current and greater need to design the teaching of FSP in a way that will make Nigerian professionals (Accountants, Engineers, Lawyers, Architects, Economists, Bankers, Managers, Lecturers etc) have access to French. This is the kind of French that Nigerians need most at the moment.

Unless we want to continue on a white goose chase or to build castles in the air, the much political talk about making French the second official language in Nigeria should no longer be our preoccupation as stakeholders in the teaching and learning of French in Nigeria. French can never be an official language in Nigeria; at least our linguistic history does not justify it. Instead of dissipating our energy in trying to push for French becoming an official language in Nigeria, we should strive to promote the teaching of FSP so that the population of professionals in Nigeria will have enough access to French. Professionals in French language education should therefore do more researches in the area of curriculum design for FSP in order to ensure that teaching methods reflect the needs of this category of learners. Although the Nigeria French Language Village and the *Alliances Françaises* have avenues through which Nigerian professionals learn French, the efforts of these centres are not adequate to cater for the large population of Nigerian professionals who are desirous to learn French. We are also aware that few Departments of French in our universities already have platforms for the teaching of FSP. Our sincere recommendation is that every Department of French in Nigerian universities should introduce certificate and diploma programmes in FSP so as to optimally activate the teaching of FSP for human development in Nigeria.

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