
FRENCH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND COUNSELLING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD AND LANGUAGE POLICY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The importance the Nigerian government attaches to language as a means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion cannot be overemphasized. This is supported by the fact that the total development of a child includes language acquisition -which can only take place in an environment conducive for teaching and learning. It is on this premise that this paper takes a look at French language teaching and counselling in early childhood and language policy in Nigeria. Early childhood or pre primary education is the education given in an educational institution to children prior to their entering the primary school. This paper specifically places emphasis on the status of French Language in Nigeria and the importance of French language in early childhood teaching. The paper among others recommended that French language should be made compulsory up to senior secondary school level in order to sustain and perfect its learning progression; that Government should set up independent monitoring committee to monitor the implementation of the policy in the primary and secondary schools; while counseling should also be given prominence at this early stage of the children's education.

The National Policy on Education (NPE) stated the importance government attaches to language, as a means of promoting social interaction, national cohesion, and preservation of cultures. It is therefore compulsory for every child to learn the language of the immediate environment. The official language is English, though in recognition of the fact that the country is surrounded by French speaking countries, the learning of French has also been encouraged. According to Makinde (2007) language is a crucial factor in

teaching and learning. Language teaching has been greatly considered in Nigeria as the basic tool of national integration towards productivity and development (Roseline, 2012). According to Araromi (2005) it is the vehicle of communication per excellence and that without it Homo sapiens will find it problematic to exist. Osagie (1985) opined that language as a key vehicle of expression is crucial to all forms of transmission of knowledge and values, and also for socialization processes. Besides, the values of language as a medium of expression or the effective transfer of accumulated knowledge, ideas, values and skills to the up-coming generation cannot be disputed.

For Adeniran (2005), the policies in Nigeria theoretically provide for multiple language learning, not only because of the multilingual status of the country but also due to her geographical location in the African continent. The National Policy on Education, stated that, it is desirable for every Nigerian to speak French for smooth interaction with our neighbours. Accordingly, French has become a second official language in Nigeria and has been made compulsory in primary and junior secondary schools but Non-Vocational Elective at the Senior Secondary School. It is not rather off the wall that the policy encourages the study of the French language.

There is a need for adequate counselling on the importance of teaching French in schools to children during the early childhood both in the public and private schools across the country, most especially that the National policy on Education had laid emphasis on language as a means of promoting social interaction, national cohesion and preservation of cultures (FRN, 2004). This sensitization therefore should not be limited to the schools alone, but to parents and the general public. One of the basic reasons for counselling during the early childhood training according to Kwaja (2010), is the existence of individual differences among children. Counselling therefore cannot be jettisoned, if teaching and learning of French language are to be effective during the early childhood stage.

The FRN (2004) captured the need for functional education for the promotion of a progressive, united Nigeria. The National Policy on Education documented the following in Section 2:

- Early childhood/pre-primary education as referred to in this documents is the education given in an educational institution to children prior to their entering the primary school. It includes the creche, the nursery and the kindergarten.

- The responsibilities of government for preprimary education shall be to promote the training of

qualified pre-primary school teachers in adequate number, contribute to the development of

suitable curriculum, supervise and control the quality of such indigenous language implementation and nation building:

- Government shall:

(a) establish pre-primary sections in existing public schools and encourage both community/private efforts in the provision of preprimary education.

(b) make provision in teacher education programmes for specialization in early childhood education.

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- (c) ensure that the medium of instruction is principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community; and to this end will:
 - (i) develop the orthography of many more Nigerian languages, and
 - (ii) produce textbooks in Nigerian languages;
- (d) ensure that the main method of teaching at this level shall be through play and that curriculum of teacher education is oriented to achieve this; regulate and control the operation of preprimary education. To this end the teacher-pupil ratio shall be 1:25;
- (e) set and monitor minimum standard for early childcare centres in the country; and
- (f) ensure full participation of government, communities and teachers associations in the running and maintenance of early childhood education facilities.

To this end, school programmes need to be relevant, practical and comprehensive, while interest and ability should determine the individual's direction in the education system. Furthermore, the policy is based on the development of the individual into a sound and effective citizen and the full integration of that individual into the community. One of its goals is the inculcation of the right type of values and attitudes for the survival of the individual and the Nigerian society. The policy stated thus: "Government appreciates the importance of language as a means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion, and preserving cultures". Thus every child shall learn the language of the immediate environment. Furthermore, in the interest of national unity it is expedient that every child be required to learn one of the three Nigerian languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. For smooth interaction with our neighbours, it is desirable for every Nigerian to speak French. Accordingly, French shall be the second official language in Nigeria and it shall be compulsory in primary and Junior Secondary Schools but Non-vocational elective at the Senior Secondary School"(Adamu, 2010).

It is in order to achieve these laudable objectives that the Nigerian Philosophy of Education is sacrosanct as it is a pivot for national development and all round development of an individual. To this end, the formulation of ideas, their integration for National development and interaction of persons and ideas are all aspects of education. (FRN, 2004). The role of education in the development of an individual and the society at large cannot be overstated. It is in realization of the above that all educational services which can promote teaching and learning of French language in schools are given prominent attention by education planners.

Counseling services according to Kwaja (2010) are among the educational services which are not only a veritable tool for the transmission of norms and values to the younger generations but also a tool for liberation from ignorance and high rate of docility. When teaching, learning and counselling improve, social vices shall reduce and the communities and the larger society shall enjoy peaceful co existence whose values cannot be overstressed. For any nation according to Egbo, (2013) to realize and attain its goals, there is the need to provide a conducive atmosphere for the teaching and learning process which to a very large extent might not be possible without counselling services. Counselling services according to Kwaja and Mormah (2011) include but not limited to the following: Orientation service, Information service, appraisal service, placement service, follow up service, referral service and teachers forum.

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According to Emananjo, (1998) with the government declaration in the National Policy on Education (2004) on the importance of French Language, its teaching and learning witnessed another dimension. Some school principals, administrators, Provosts, Rectors and Vice Chancellors in the country are already awake to the development. Some of the developments are:

- The language curriculum has been reorganized in the interest of teaching and learning of the language at the various levels.
- The higher institutions have been able to produce teachers to teach the language at the primary school, secondary school, colleges of education, and other tertiary institutions.
- At the colleges of education and university levels, department of French and European studies carry out research on the way to enhance the teaching and learning of the language.
- Government has been able to establish a French language village which serves as an immersion center for effective learning of the language.
- At the Junior Secondary school level the language is taught as a core-subject. Unfortunately it is a Non-vocational Elective at the Senior Secondary School level.
- Private organizations also contribute to this development as French language learning centres continue to spring up.
 - The teaching and learning of the language now features in Television and radio programs in the country.

The Status of French Language in Nigeria

French is the mother tongue of seventy-five million people, of whom sixty-three million are Europeans. It is the official language of five European countries, the first language of ten million people outside of Europe, and the only language other than English which is spoken on five continents. Furthermore, one hundred and twenty million francophone in forty-five countries use French every day, and two hundred million people from around the world understand, speak, read or write French. Since the eighteenth century, French has competed with English as the international language of diplomacy. It is now the second official language of the United Nations and the European Community. On the African continent, there are eighteen countries where French is the official language and has a powerful presence. The total population in these countries is over two hundred and fifty four million people. In spite of the fact that only those who are literate actually communicate in French in most francophone countries. French is directly and indirectly the communication key to a quarter of a billion people in an enormous expanse of this great continent.

Geographically, Nigeria is surrounded by French speaking countries, a situation that makes it imperative for other citizens to take French as a second official language. Also, with increasing globalization, which has reduced the world to a global village, nothing stops Nigerians from having a working knowledge of a third or fourth

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international language. With democratization, Nigerians are looking forward to an influx of foreign investments. This means that Nigeria's national business will be interacting more with international businessmen from all over the world. There is, therefore, the need for them to be able to work effectively in the international business community. Such a progress will not fully materialize, unless a confidence nurturing mechanism embodied in having a shared common language, which has been attested to by experts as a key factor in promoting the pace of mutual understanding among trade associates, is firmly established.

Importance of French Language in Early Childhood Teaching

The importance of French language cannot be over emphasized for the development of the child. Among these importance are:

1. French language helps the learner to understand that language is an invention of man and that ideas can be expressed equally effectively in many modern languages.
2. There is no such thing as one language being better for all purposes than another.
3. It encourages greater acceptance of other national groups and new comers to Nigeria as a country. Children are less apt to think that others "talk funny" if they have had some contact with another language.
4. Through an introduction to French language, children become aware of the similarities that exist among many words in the languages.
5. Children learn that many French words are derivatives of words from other languages and vice versa. This helps combat attitude of smugness regarding one's own language.
6. It provides another important means for the child to gain a better understanding of national groups through direct contact with an important aspect of their language.
7. It gives the child who will pursue language study an invaluable familiarity with pronunciation during his or her formative and uninhibited years.
8. It will serve as a stimulus and motivational factor in the study of other people.
9. It will help develop an appreciation of the colour and beautiful tonal qualities of some languages.
10. By focusing attention upon communication it will help the child appreciate some problems caused by language barriers in the solution of international problems which face the people of the world today.

French is the most disqualifying factor by international offices. This claim is substantiated by the French government's perpetual linguistic stipulation over its approval of the Africa's candidates for the post of Secretary General at the United Nations Organization. In other words, fluency in the French language was made a condition for gaining the French government's political support to the UN secretary general position, because it is the second widely used language at the organization. This reputable international post should have been occupied by Nigerian candidates due to the country's position in Africa. Unfortunately, the mono-lingual nature of the majority of Nigeria's experts in various fields, most of whom have been certified to be the best in the world,

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made them lose such a prestigious office to the immediate past and incumbent Secretaries General of the United Nations Organization, the Egyptian polyglot, Dr. Boutros Ghali, and the Ghanaian diplomat, Mr. Kofi Annan, both who are well-versed in French language (Soyoye, 2001).

Empirical studies have confirmed that while any language will be useful for some jobs or for some regions, French is the foreign language that can be useful throughout the world. French as a foreign language is the second most frequently taught language in the world after English. When deciding on a foreign language for work or school, French is the language that will give you the best choices later on in your studies or your career. In what follows is a number of important International Organizations in which French along with English is one of the few official or working languages:

- The United Nations
- The International Monetary Fund
- United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)
- Worldwide Postal Services
- International Health Organization
- International Council of Nurses
- World Innovation Forum
- The International Labor Bureau
- International Center for Human Rights and Democratic Development
- World Heritage Information Network
- International Council of Sport Science and Physical Education
- Federation Internationale de Gymnastique

Regionally, among the criteria for appointment to top offices in sub-regional organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), is fluency in the two prominent sub-regional lingua franca, English and French. However, it is pertinent to note that students who like the arts, dance, the food industry, fashion a beauty products, or advertising mat all of those professions rely consistently on a vocabulary based on French. The basic lexicon used in all of those fields originates from French and is a needed tool for those who want to rise beyond the lower level of those professions. French is a language of culture, politics, diplomacy, art, fashion, publicity, dance, technology, science, and cuisine. The acquisition of French is advocated because of their outstanding presence in Africa. To this end, the present administration must start now, if we want the situation to change during the next ten, twenty or thirty years for the sake of Nigeria future children.

Conclusion

Language, as it were, is culture in expression; and culture and development are interwoven in Africa. Hence, French language is central to human existence and, therefore, should be nurtured and preserved. When a language is lost, the culture is lost; and a lost culture is knowledge lost: also there is no development without knowledge. On the other hand, a language learnt is knowledge gained; and we know that knowledge is power, which brings about development that Nigeria is in dire need of. The more

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languages you know, the more keys to treasure houses you have. If you know all the other languages and don't know your language, that is called enslavement. If you know your language and add all the other languages, that is called empowerment. French language is a key to adapting well in the African continent.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

1. French language should be made compulsory up to senior secondary school level in order to sustain and perfect its learning progression. Also, it must feature at least 5 times in a week in the school time-table as against 1 or 2 times in a week.
2. Policy makers and other stake holders in the education system should work out a working syllabus that will take care of immersion program for the primary and secondary education. The writers observed that French language learning at this level lacks the necessary exposure which is one of the vital process in language acquisition.
3. There should be proper education and re-orientation of Nigerians on the need to encourage the learning of French at all levels and in fact across disciplines.
4. There is need for serious enlightenment on the part of the public to accept guidance and counseling as an important service at the early childhood. This will help develop strategies for school administrators and teachers to achieve a realistic perception of pupils in their school environment.
5. The Government should as a matter of concern intensify the training and appointment of guidance counselors in schools to help meet the pupils' problems especially during the early childhood period.
6. Government should set up an independent monitoring committee to monitor the implementation of the policy in the primary and secondary schools.
7. Government should equip the language laboratory with modern learning aid such as internet facilities, computers, and audio-visual materials.
8. More French language learning centres should be encouraged to provide access to other people who may be interested in learning the language outside school.
9. French double-major should be offered at NCE level for a functional and effective learning of the language.
10. Qualified and competent teachers of French should be employed and every qualification based on paper qualification or foreign identity should be discouraged.
11. Seasonal training and re-training of teachers of French should be encouraged in order to attune to the very latest method of teaching the language.
12. Teachers should be well remunerated for better output.

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