



Nigerian French Language Curriculum and the Millennium Goals: Issues in the Nigerian Educational System

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Abstract

Language is indispensable in the process of education. Education, on the other hand, language is universally acknowledged as a problem solver, which makes it paramount in the achievement of human developmental goals. It is also the key to transformation and sustainable development of any nation. Che Guevara in 1963 emphasized in his essay *"Against Bureaucratism"*, the need to turn society into a "big school", where success in studies translates to capacity building of the individual both economically and morally to the advantage of society. This is only possible in a society, whose doors are open to new languages and cultures, consequently attracting knowledge from other lands in order to better face the challenges that life has presented it with. Foreign language learners around the world are trained to view the acquisition of language as the acquisition of a skills. As such, the learners tend to be more flexible and adaptable to new situations, which is an asset in an ever-changing world. Using the socio-historical and descriptive approaches, this paper seeks to highlight the importance of the French language curriculum in education to the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals as an essential complement to national strategies for job creation and enhancement, as well as human capital development.

KEY WORDS: French Language, Curriculum, Sustainable Development Goals, Knowledge-based Education, Educational System, Human Capital Development.

Introduction

Education is the bedrock of development of any nation and has a formative effect on the mind, character and physical capacities of the nation. Through education, a nation deliberately transmit accumulated knowledge skills and

values from one generation to another, and in a way, evolves a national culture, character and identity. For this reason, Education and educational change should serve as a symbol of our revolution towards a better society. The drive to achieve the millennium goal and the proper implementation of the Nigerian Policy on Education (NPE) should be seen as a means to mass economic participation and mobilization. The effort should be geared at building an educational system oriented towards the consolidation of a humanistic, democratic, proactive, participatory, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multilingual and inter-cultural society. Even with the quest for the attainment of the Millennium Development Goal 2, by 2015 (Compulsory universal primary education for every Nigerian child), there are still too many children who have completed primary education without being able to read and write. As such, there is the need to upgrade the basic education system, by paying attention to three critical factors: the nature of the curriculum, the relevance of teacher training and the adequacy of knowledge assessment systems. Since the curricula of a nation points at the way a nation should thread, fabrics of our diverse cultures and religion should be woven into the curriculum for effective building process of a virile human engine for development.

Curriculum Development in Nigeria:

Formal educational curriculum started with the arrival of the first Christian mission in Nigeria, in 1842. These Christian Missions established Christian Schools, formulated the schools' curricula as well as the schools' maintenance. The main objective of the missionaries in opening the first primary schools was to train teacher-catechists, lay-readers and cooks, who were to give the new converts basic instructions in the English language, thereby, achieving the missionary work which was their primary reason for being in the country.

These missionaries went on to open secondary grammar schools at the demand of the locals. These brought into existence schools like; Church Missionary Society (CMS) Grammar School Ibadan in June 1859, and subsequently, the Methodist Boys' High, the Methodist

Girls' High and the Baptist Academy. Again, the curriculum for these schools were managed by the missionaries as the subjects taught in these schools were selected from the lists of subjects taught in British Grammar Schools at that time (Adeyinka, 1983).

Very little consideration was given to the future needs of the pupils as this type of curriculum was considered suitable to produce individuals that would fit into the white collar kind of jobs that were then available. For this reason, the British literary tradition was strictly adhered to in the early Nigerian Grammar Schools' curriculum, so that training in agriculture or preparation for self-employment in other areas of vocational education was not considered fit for inclusion at the time. It was not until 1887 that a board of education was constituted for Nigeria to formulate education policies and laws for Nigeria.

After 1914, there was a genuine intention to educate Africans in line with their needs and peculiar orientation. This was seen in the report of the Phelps-Stokes Commission. The report observed that education in Nigeria was not tailored to the needs of the people and it was also recommended that in subjects like History, Geography and Biology and the like; emphasis should be on African countries and not European countries. Based on the recommendations of this commission, the colonial administration made genuine attempts at providing technical and agricultural education that were in line with the needs of the people.

Just before independence, the then Eastern Region, revised its Educational Curriculum for primary and teacher training schools (Dike, 1959). In other words, they realized the need to discard part of the British-type academic curriculum and replace it with one that was more relevant to the needs of the people. Same was the case in other regions as they tried to formulate educational policies that captured the realities of the times, thereby, putting in place an educational system that was founded on the knowledge of what the society lacked.

Bilbao et al (2008) defines curriculum as: "The total learning experiences of individuals not only in school, but in society as well"

In today's knowledge economy, curriculum development plays a vital role in improving the economy of a country (Alvior: 2). The Curriculum development affects not just the learners and the teachers but it is also about the development of the society. Hence, whenever there are changes or development happening around the world, the school curricula are affected and need to be updated in order to address the needs of the society(1)

In recent times, the Nigerian government, through its "9-Year Basic Education Curriculum", has deemed it necessary to introduce the French language as a core subject from the fourth grade in the primary school up to the end of the junior secondary class (JSS 3). Thus the programme states:

The study of French will certainly be of great use for Nigerian Secondary School pupils, given the geographical location of our country and the enormous role played by Nigeria in the West African sub-region and indeed in Africa. For purely utilitarian reasons, Nigerians need to take their rightful places in International Organizations (such as the ECOWAS, the INTERPOL, the UN and the AU) and Diplomatic Corps, where French is a pre-requisite for employment.”(Federal Ministry of Education, 2011)

Meanwhile, in train-the-trainer workshop organized on the use of the Revised 9-Year Basic Education Curriculum, Dike (2014) in his opening remarks, reiterated that all the other subjects have been restructured in such a way that the basic elements of knowledge are captured. Pre-vocational subjects like Agriculture, Home Economics, Technology, Culture and Creative Arts, Religion and National Values, Business Studies and Language (French), which were formally elective subjects, are now compulsory subjects to be taken from the fourth grade of primary school to the end of the Junior Secondary School. These pre-vocational studies will enable these youngsters acquire critical skills of entrepreneurial attitude, thereby distancing them from delinquent acts, which youths in their age bracket are usually prone to. Presently in our tertiary institutions, entrepreneurship education is being introduced. This is in line with what obtains in most Asian Pacific counties like China and India, where the entrepreneurship component is built into the education system. Countries like Britain and Nigeria’s neighbouring Ghana have also made giant strides in the teaching of enterprise education and the impact is well felt in these countries and beyond as more people from across the world, see the need to send their children to these countries, for further studies, in order to acquire knowledge that works.

Building a Knowledge Based Society

Education is a challenge through which society reinforces its social ethics thus preparing its young people for the role they are to play in that society. In other words, education nurtures, develops and preserves creativity, potentials and talent of the members of a given society, so that they can, through the exhibition of knowledge acquired, contribute to societal development. Nevertheless, functional knowledge should be a requisite

factor in the educational system of any nation that truly strives to attain sustainable development. This is true of a world power like America and developing countries like The Asian Tigers in the Asian-Pacific region like China, Japan, Malaysia and Indonesia. Their experiences are evidence to the fact that functional knowledge-based education is an essential element for the rejuvenation of their societies. Also, countries that have made colossal investments in their cultures have today attained the peak of development in that direction. For instance, China has developed to a tremendous level her traditional and herbal medicine. Japan in the development of the sub-conscious mind has made huge progress in the art of healing (yoga) and self defence with *taekwondo* and *Judo*. These countries know they can only survive through their knowledge and skills. A people that depend heavily on their natural resources are at risk of losing their habits for interest in hard work and skill acquisition. Knowledge based society is a very successful concept. In most European countries, it is used as a yardstick for measuring strategic vocational higher education, thus aiming at promoting employability and continuous upgrading of professional extra-functional skills. . To this end, Kafela (2010: 2) opines that: "Knowledge and [skill] are the heart and mind of the global economy. The countries that thrive will be those that encourage their people to develop skills and competencies"

An educational system that alienates its citizens from their socio-cultural and environmental realities will leave an adverse effect of imbalance in the psychology of such a people. This is true also of a society that depends on newly discovered natural resources. For such a society, there is a tendency that her citizenry will, in the nearest future, be out of touch with its habits and interests in hard work and skill acquisition. On the contrary, countries that have over time founded their development and survival on knowledge and skills, by building a whole culture and educational system around it, will always be able to maintain a sustainable development through the thick and thins of life. In such countries, parents are aware that the future and survival of their children depend largely on the skills they acquire. For such people, the knowledge they acquire determines their reaction towards society. If therefore this knowledge encourages cultural creativity, critical thinking, understanding, humility and logical reasoning, then its effect on society is most likely to be positive. For such a society, her watch words become, reason and reality. This is the benchmark of a knowledge driven society.

Exogenous Language Question in Nigeria: Its Importance

The promotion of exogenous or foreign languages in Africa is a herculean task, in view of the fact that most African counties are striving towards the

preservation of their cultural patrimony. In affirmation of this proposition, Ayeni and Ebong (2016:2053) emphasized thus:

Les langues jouent un rôle vital dans le développement. Elles sont aussi un moyen d'atteindre une éducation de qualité pour tous et de renforcer la coopération, de bâtir des sociétés du savoir inclusif, de préserver le patrimoine culturel, et de mobiliser la volonté politique en faveur de l'application des bienfaits de la science et de la technologie au service du développement durable. Languages play a vital role in development. They are also a means to attaining quality education for all and to reinforce cooperation, to build societies on global and inclusive knowledge, to preserve cultural heritage, and to mobilize political will in favor of the application of the benefits of science and the technology in the service of sustainable development. (our translation)

For those exogenous languages which are already thriving in the continent, it is as a result of their acceptance as part of Africa's colonial legacy, which is the case primarily for English, French, Spanish and Portuguese. Another reason could be as a result of the realization that these foreign languages are needed for the continent's transactions with the rest of the world. Nigeria, like many other countries, cannot afford to be an island. Although linguistically an island in a francophone sea, Nigeria is often seen by her neighbours as an 'Anglophone imperialist nation'. It was in a bid to counter this impression of the neighbouring countries about the country (Nigeria), that the then Head of State, General Sani Abacha on the 14th of December, 1996 during the Annual Patrons' Dinner of the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs at Abuja had to state that:

We do recognize that our sub-region, West Africa, consists of peoples divided not only by artificial colonial boundaries but also by linguistic differences. The lack of easy communication posed by linguistic

barriers has serious implications for the realization of our goal of total integration within the sub-region. It is important to address this issue in the interest of sub-regional integration. Nigeria will embark on a rigorous language programme that should ensure that our people within the shortest possible time become bilingual... (Modum 2001:11 and Iwuchukwu, 2004:297 cited in Ayeni, 2012:274)

Owing to the situation, the Federal Government of Nigeria deemed it fit to introduce a second official language, French, in the country. Hence, the National Policy on Education, revised editions of 1998 and 2004 saw the introduction of French as a subject to be taught in Nigerian schools.

Government appreciates the importance of language as a means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion and preserving cultures.... 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.... (NPE, 2004: 10).

Today, this foreign language features prominently even in the curricula of our institutions of higher learning. It is a fallacy to believe that languages are neutral commodities on the linguistic market, whose value can only be dictated by practical demand. The promotion of languages is a vital aspect of cultural diplomacy and no nation has been able to achieve much in this regard without investing in them. Every country has its own history, its own relationship to one or several colonial languages. Each has its own political reasons for furthering the teaching of one foreign language or the other. In the case of Nigeria, the adoption of the French language as its second official language is seen as a means that can serve to strengthen the ties between Nigeria and her West African Francophone neighbours. An understanding of the 'vision du monde' of her French neighbours, which can only be facilitated by the understanding of the French language, will help Nigeria gain the trust and confidence of these French neighbours. This notwithstanding, it is

obvious that the use of foreign languages far exceeds the immediate global needs of national interest or governmental policies. Language confers on its users, identity and it also favours empathy .As such, Ayeni (2012) observes:

Les langues reflètent et transmettent des perceptions du monde. En tant que véhicules de valeurs et d'expressions culturelles et sociales, elles constituent un facteur déterminant de l'identité de groupes et d'individus » (277).

« Languages reflect and transmit world perceptions. As a vehicle for the transmission of social and cultural values and expressions, they constitute a determining factor for groups and individuals' identity. (our translation)

Language is a more potent means of cohesion than colour or creed. Linguistic talent is usually recognized as a mark of distinction since language is the medium for communicating all other aspects of human knowledge. Multilingual people have easy access to knowledge and more privileged than those who rely on interpreters. It has been observed that linguistic competence has a profound bearing on examination performance, and that it is very often the explanation for the seemingly huge gap between successful and unsuccessful candidates, rather than the assumed lack of knowledge of the information required. These linguistically competent people can work toward the promotion of cultural understanding and respect for diversity by breaking down cultural barriers and fostering good will and mutual relationship. Speaking of breaking down cultural and ideological barriers, fostering good will, nurturing mutual relationships and building bridges across people of different tribes and tongues, the 19th century philosopher, Philo Judaeus in Ostrower (1965) opines that:

The acquisition of languages, other than his own, at once gives a man a high standing with those who know and speak them. They now consider him a friendly person, who brings no small evidence of fellow feelings in his familiarity with their vocabulary since that familiarity seems to render them secure against the chance of

*meeting any disastrous injury at his hand.
(cited in Ebong 2012:135)*

With the increasing access to global market through transnational relations, regional integration and globalization, people from various works of life are able to hook up to clients and other business people from a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds, thereby, extending their societies' influence to other lands. A population that is linguistically competent in more than one foreign language cannot help but provide a multitude of services in the international public sector.

French Language and the Millennium Goals

According to Salawu (2001); “. . .if Language must survive on the national scene, it must be used extensively” In view of this submission, the survival of the French language as a de-facto second official language in Nigeria is dependent on its use by the Nigerian populace. “*Lately, the minister of state for Education, Prof Anthony Anwukah, announced that French was on its way to becoming Nigeria’s second official language*”.(Adeleke, 2016:6). This statement was made on the backdrop of policy, being that the National Policy on Education, where this policy statement is entrenched, does not have the backing of the law constitutionally to enforce the implementation of French as a second official language in Nigeria.

The popularity of the French language in Nigeria dates back to the early 1960s, especially as a result of the recommendation of the Yaoundé conference of language experts in 1961, that a second European language should be introduced into the school, after pupils must have mastered skills in the official language of the concerned countries. In this regard, English was expected to be introduced to the Francophone African countries, while French was expected to be introduced into the Anglophone African countries including Nigeria. (Araromi, 2005 cited in Makinde, 2007). The Nigerian Government realizes the usefulness of French, especially, in our relationship with the Francophone neighbours and therefore has it entrenched in the NPE of 1998 and 2004 as Nigeria’s second official language. Hence explains Moody(1970):

In Nigeria, the French Language is a foreign language. Since Nigeria is surrounded by French speaking countries,

the importance of the Language in Nigeria for social, political, economic and international relations cannot be over emphasized. The use of the language is to facilitate communication, to promote understanding between language originators and language recipients, and to enable useful, appropriate and efficient action to take place. (Moody, 1970)

If education, as Fafunwa (2003: 25) opines, is “. . . the aggregate of all the processes by which a child or an adult develops abilities, attitudes and other forms of behavior, which are of positive value to the society in which he lives”, Education is thus not only beneficial to the individual who acquires it but also to the larger society. This is in line with Odia and Omotonmwan (2007: 81) assertion that: “Education is a process of disseminating knowledge either to ensure social control or to guarantee rational direction of the society, or both”.

It focuses on the cultivation of certain societal norms in individuals, who in turn, participate effectively in the promotion of cultural, political and socio-economic development in society. This of course is not achievable without language. Hence language is indispensable in the process of development. It only goes to confirm Osagie's (1985:120) claims that “Language as a key vehicle of expression is crucial to all forms of transmission of knowledge, values and also to socialization processes. Besides, the values of language as a medium of expression for the effective transfer of accumulated knowledge cannot be disputed”. Going by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis which states that language determines the way we think, that is to say, the way a language is organized determines how the user perceives the world and that the distinctions encoded in one language are not found in any other language. This only means that we can only think in the categories that one's language allows one to think. Therefore, a bilingual person has at his disposal at least two world views. He is able to perceive realities from two different perspectives, based on the two languages he speaks. With regards to the millennium goals, Barron (2012:6) opines that:

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) [now Sustainable Development Goals (SDGS)] are a set of shared aspirations and effort to make the world a

more equitable and sustainable place. At the heart of the goals is the recognition that for this global initiative to be effective, all people need to be included. Language is the key to inclusion. Language is at the centre of human activity, self-expression and identity. Recognizing the primary importance that people place on their own language fosters a kind of true participation in development that achieves lasting results. (6)

From the forgoing, language acquisition can thus be seen as a means by which the child develops a communicative mind which is of positive value to his society. Hence, language education helps increase the standard of living of a people and facilitates integration into the world economy. According to the World Bank (1999: 25), *“Successful development entails, more than investing in physical capital or closing the gaps in capital. It also entails acquiring and using [language based] knowledge.”* Thus to successfully confront the challenges of development, language education must be heavily invested into, as it is indispensable in the process of Development. In acknowledgment of the importance of language, the Nigerian Government had it spelt out in her National Policy on Education, first published in 1977, and then revised in 1981, 1998 and 2004 respectively. Thus, it states in Section 1 Number 10 that: *“Government appreciates the importance of language as a means of promoting social interaction, national cohesion and preserving cultures”*(NPE, 2004:10) Language (French) is thus paramount to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals as it is a uniting factor. Language has an influential role in fostering the process of an informed public dialogue or debate (Barron, 2012: 9).

The 8th of September 2000, witnessed the assembly of 189 heads of states and governments at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, United States of America, to adopt for themselves the Millennium Declaration otherwise known as the Millennium Development Goals. Done at the dawn of a new millennium, it was a defining moment for global cooperation in the 21st Century. The goals are: To eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; to achieve universal primary education; to promote gender equality and empower women; to reduce child mortality; to improve maternity health; to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; to ensure environmental sustainability and to develop a global partnership for development.

These goals can only be achievable in a world where people speak and understand the languages of their neighbours, thereby, appreciating how these different people view the world around them. It is often said that national unity is impossible without cultural and linguistic unification. Today, the planet has become smaller as a result of spectacular development in the areas of transportation and communication. Interactions at the International scene entail the use of the languages whose influence goes beyond the borders of ethnic groups from where they emanate. In today's world, monolingualism is a handicap. As such, to be effectively integrated into the international society, we need to learn the language of our neighbours, of the countries beyond our borders or foreign languages. Hence, Jimoh in Ebong & Ayeni (2015:186) observes that:

For Nigeria, the most natural option in our choice of a language that would contribute to our bid to achieve multilingualism for transnational communication, sub-regional integration and for responding to the needs of globalization is French, which is the language of our immediate neighbours.

If we are, thus, able to understand the language of our neighbours, information as to the peculiarities or uniqueness of their societies, the strategies they have employed to effectively implement the Millennium Development Goals, and the extent of the success they have achieved, will not be far-fetched. This will, in turn, help us compare notes and improve on our strategies and techniques in areas where we have not made so much progress.

Conclusion

Language development is a tool that can help build a communicative bridge between local and global communities. The ability to understand, speak, read and write a language like French, allows its speakers to communicate with other French-speaking people around the world. It creates an opportunity for the individual who has learned French as a second official language, to understand and appreciate the history and evolution of the cultures of indigenous French people around the world. It also enables him to benefit from travel and to develop a competitive advantage in the work force,

thereby, developing a global partnership for development. The Italian film director, Federico Fellini, once said; *“a different language is a different vision of life”*. (Communicaid Group Ltd, 2010). Furthermore, since the learning of a language would naturally imply the learning of the culture of the people who speak that language, it thus would pave the way to recognizing, understanding and respecting cultural diversity within our environs and the world at large.

Education on the other hand enables a people to stand up against injustice and fear, and empowers them with the apt to change their reality, their lives and the society they live in. Education has the focus and target of addressing the dichotomy and disparity created through gender inequality and gender imbalance in developing countries such as Nigeria; and these are basically, the objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals.

It would, therefore, not be out of place for the Nigerian society to be global in orientation and application, thereby, equipping itself with proficiency in an international language like French. It would rather be out of place if her population is unable to communicate effectively with her immediate neighbours, the francophones. As Babatunde (2014:524) puts it, *“A person’s world view can stretch out in front of them for miles or it can be a box around them depending on who they communicate with”*. Nigeria should, therefore, strive to establish a crucial link between education and French as a language of openness and development. Effective investment in French education should be seen as a comprehensive vision of development geared towards the different linguistic areas and to the needs of the population interfacing at all levels of society. The acquisition and dissemination of requisite knowledge and skills, their effective application to address the challenges that cumulatively result in sustainable development, are highly dependent on a strong educational system. For Nigeria and Nigerians, French naturally imposes itself as that critical factor that could fast track this all round sustainable development now, and indeed for generations to come.

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