

TWENTY YEARS OF PRACTICE AND TEACHING OF FRENCH IN NIGERIA (1995-2015): A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

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Abstract

Although French is not the official language of Nigeria, several Nigerian Governments are quite aware of its relevance to the survival of the country. It is evident that Nigeria surrounded by Francophone countries geographically in the North, East and West. The South is surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean. The assistance and encouragement provided by the Government for the teaching and learning of French are more or less insignificant if one takes note of the role it plays at the level of policy formation and its usage in administration. The language policy gives French language the status of second official language; though no official documents reinforce this position in our schools and in our day to day life. This paper reviews academic papers and publications that are related to hindrances and constraints militating against the teaching and practice of French from secondary to tertiary institutions within the past twenty years (1995-2015) under review.

Keywords: *teaching, practice, language policy, attitude, prospects*

Résumé

Bien que le français ne soit pas la langue officielle du Nigeria, plusieurs gouvernements nigériens sont tout à fait conscients de son importance pour la survie du pays. Il est évident que le Nigeria est entouré géographiquement de pays francophones au Nord, à l'Est et à l'Ouest. Le Sud est entouré par l'océan Atlantique. L'aide et l'encouragement fournis par le gouvernement pour l'enseignement et l'apprentissage du français sont plus ou moins insignifiants si l'on prend en compte le rôle qu'il joue au niveau de l'élaboration des politiques et de son usage dans l'administration. La politique linguistique confère à la langue française le statut de deuxième langue officielle ; même si aucun document officiel ne renforce cette position dans nos écoles et dans notre vie de tous les jours. Cet article passe en revue les articles et publications académiques liés aux obstacles et contraintes militant contre l'enseignement et la pratique du français des établissements secondaires au supérieur au cours des vingt dernières années (1995-2015) examinées.

Mots clés : enseignement, pratiques, politique linguistique, attitudes, perspectives

Introduction

If I teach French it is not for lack of ambition. It was a design of fate. Law and journalism would be more suitable for me as professions and not teaching French. And if I have to teach at all, maybe at an advanced level. This is my determination when in 1988 I accepted the offer of admission for three years in a bachelor's of Arts degree in education (French-history as teaching subjects), after three years of training in a Federal Advanced Teachers College.

The history of preferential choice of vocations of many French teachers in Nigeria will reveal many interesting testimonies. But what should interest the Nigerian French teachers at this point will not be less than the quantity and quality of what they have been able to do with French in a hostile English-speaking environment such as Nigeria.

The successive governments of Nigeria are well aware of the importance of the French language for the country's regional economic survival (see Njoku 1999: 47), especially, and at the international level going by the country geographical situation and population which includes the largest grouping of the black race of the world. Consequently, there are many administrative documents on the successive language policies which confer on French the status of optional foreign language and compulsory foreign language on the list of school subjects in the first cycle of secondary education (Molu et al, 1999: 39-46, Osunfisan , 1999:116). In reality, its optional status is more conventional and maintained by the educational authorities in public schools than in private schools where the ability to use the French language is a sign of prestige.

In this paper, the observations and suggestions of French research-teachers over the past twenty years are highlighted in order to assess the situation vis-à-vis the learning and teaching of French in Nigeria. The significant areas of interest to us are limited to publications on language acquisition and translation as a profession. The other areas, such as

literature and applied linguistic studies, tend to be seen as being very academic. Specifically, the timeline for this discourse covers the years 1995 (the year of our first contribution on French in Nigeria) to 2015 (the year of the present paper).

Ilupeju, (1998: 42-47)¹ discusses the proliferation of methods (see also Njoku, 1999:48) used in teaching French as a foreign language in Nigeria. For him, this constitutes a handicap for the adequate acquisition of French because it hardly meets the daily needs and aspirations of learners. To remedy this phenomenon, he proposes the design of a unique method that would answer the following questions:

- i. What group of students should it address?
- ii. What should its content be?
- iii. What role should French teacher training institutions play?

It doesn't stop there. He then proposes pedagogy for:²

- i. The teaching of structural grammar;
- ii. Teaching language levels - the aspirations of young people and the needs of society;
- iii. The teaching of French-language literature;
- iv. The teaching of French-speaking culture and civilisation.

It concludes by elucidating the inherent merits of choosing a single method.

The NOUVEL HORIZON series directed by Tunde Ajiboye was created in 1998 for the two secondary levels (JSS and SSS) aimed at teaching and learning French. Volumes 1 to 3 are intended for the first cycle

¹ Written in 1995, presented at a conference in 1996 at the French Village of Nigeria and accepted for publication (CAPFUA, 1996), but finally published in 1998 in JONOFUEL vol. 1, No. 1.

² Already in 1983, Adelekan had proposed methodologies for teaching French without providing any manual.

(Junior Secondary School 1-3) while only volume 4 is intended for the second cycle (Senior Secondary School 1-3). These textbooks more or less meet the content requirements of the WASCE³ French syllabus. The NOUVEL HORIZON 1-3 series is subject to almost annual revisions from 1998 until 2014. The revision of volume 4 stopped in 2013. Apart from the practical- accounts for the popularity of the series' team leader who had a lot of success and acceptance among French teachers in Nigeria. As Ilupeju (1998: 44-47) suggested, the NEW HORIZON provides learners and teachers with:

- i. A teacher's book;
- ii. A student's book and
- iii. A workbook for each volume.

In 2001, Mojola et al. had also designed a three-volume manual (Je démarre etc.) which offers learners and teachers:

- i. A teacher's book;
- ii. A student's book and
- iii. A workbook for each volume.

We do not have statistical data from schools that adopt this manual, but it is certain that its use is restricted to a part of western Nigeria covered by the authors' workplaces. A visit to some large popular bookstores in Lagos shows the unavailability of some volumes of the series.

As for Popoola (1998: 69-77) : ... the teacher is dependent on the type of method used and that his teaching approach is considerably influenced by the textbook and the materials at his disposal. To facilitate the task of the teacher in order to meet the interests and specific needs of his students, he offers him the communicative method whose advantages over other methods are elaborated.

³ West African School Certificate Examination.

Adesola (1999:72-79) considers the 1990s as the advent of the proliferation of specialized private schools where French is a tool for professional success. For him, the teaching of French in the said schools favors the well-to-do economic stratum of the metropolises, where Lagos plays a very dominant role due to its status as an economic capital... other cities do not offer... job opportunities for the new graduates from Nigeria's education system. Today, Abuja, the political capital, competes with Lagos in terms of its administrative status, the presence of French-speaking embassies, French cultural centers and French institutes, among others.

The analysis of the text of the syllabus (WAEC, NERC, CFTD)⁴ of French in the second level of secondary education is the subject of study in Ilupeju, (2002: 51-64). It presents a detailed analysis of the French program at the Senior Secondary School (SSS) level where it highlights good text development in good language but with many gaps in the methodological intentions of the content. The content of the syllabus is too vast to teach in an insufficient amount of time. To the shortcomings observed, it proposes adequate solutions for a 'rational' application for the pedagogy of the language skills required, namely: *listening, speaking, reading, writing and critical thinking*. He adds that the CFTD document: “*Petit guide pédagogique pour la préparation des candidats au S.S.S.C.E*” (Small educational guide for the preparation of candidates for the S.S.S.C.E) for French gives details on how to approach each chosen method, was not yet available to the teachers for whom it was designed. Today, only teachers on scholarships from the French Embassy in Nigeria who have followed refresher training at the three centers located in Jos, Ibadan and Enugu have the possibility of obtaining a copy of this famous, essential document.

⁴ WAEC-West African Examination Council; NERC-National Educational Research Council ; CFTD-Centre for French Teaching and Documentation.

Learning French in an environment outside France requires all kinds of language contact interference. Alabi, (2009: 133-163), makes an inventory of the points of language which cause errors and syntactic, semantic, phonetic and morphological deviations among Nigerian university learners of French as he identified them at the Nigeria French Language Village⁵. Among the structural problems identified among learners, the most striking is that due to the multiple registration of multidisciplinary courses complementary to French. He bases his fear on the fact that the majority of students who served as samples did not demonstrate a solid foundation in French, which adds to ethnic differentiations. It should be noted that all the problems of interference of languages searched, to which suggestions have been made, still persist among students. Either the proposed solutions are not reliable or feasible, or those for whom they are intended are not aware of them or they ignore them. The proof is that the majority of students in the Departments where French is taught in my establishment return from the Nigeria French Language Village (NFLV) after an academic year with little or no improvement not only in their oral productions, but also in their writing.

In his analysis of temporal errors due to contact with the French and Étsàkò languages, Igbeneghu (2010:239-260) suggests that teachers take into account the data provided in 3.0. and 4.0. of his write-up on the parametric divergences of the time of the two languages; especially with regard to the displacement of temporal constituents. He is of the opinion that this warning will allow teachers of French in a multilingual class to provide themselves with solutions to the anticipated problems.

⁵ University Center for French Studies which serves as a place for language immersion for students of French; founded in 1991 to replace the year abroad in a French-speaking country.

In the same perspective, Gandu, (2011: 176-208) examines in 30 northern federal schools⁶, the phonic and graphic interferences among Hausa-speaking students in the process of learning French. She observes that major pronunciation problems were isolated in students only in the production of vowels and semi-vowels only in discrete groups; that of consonants is realized only in syllabic groups. Yet, pronounced in isolation, none of the vowels and consonants examined caused articulation problems in Native Hausa Speakers (NHAS). Nevertheless, NHAS have difficulty articulating vowels into discrete units and sound sequences. She notices that English rather than Hausa at the root of the majority of the problems of articulation of certain vowels and consonants in syllabic and discrete situations.

Ebine and Houenon (2013:135-146) also observed identical problems in the articulation of French phones among Yoruba speakers. In their examinations of segmental and suprasegmental component problems, they isolate phonemes present in Yoruba but absent in French from those present in French but absent in Yoruba. To remedy this problem, Gandu (2011: 1999-2001) offers refresher courses in phonology and corrective phonetics aimed at the major languages: Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba to teachers of French in secondary schools. Then, she asks that the time allocated to French on the timetable be increased because the lack of French teaching time is (also) the cause of poor performance of learners.

Despite the observations and recommendations, the difficulties of correctly articulating the sounds of French are far from improving, not only among the NHAS but also among Yoruba-speaking and Ibo-speaking students. We testify to this phenomenon in the themes of university dissertation projects (Alaya, 2014, Omaghoni, 2015, Adebayo, 2015).

⁶ The study covered the North-West, North-Central and North-East of Nigeria from 2007 to 2008 progressively, covering two classes of students of the same level.

The handicap engendered by the phenomenon of assigning gender to nouns in French among Ibo-speaking learners was the main subject in the communication of Iteogu, (2013: 116-124). He remarks that ... *French has too much inconsistency in the composition of the rules of French grammar and the arbitrary assignment of gender to nouns*. For him, since the attribution of genders to nouns does not exist in Igbo, the Ibo-speaking student finds himself faced with a situation of linguistic contradictions; which slows down his momentum for the French language after the first cycle of secondary school. This remark is not limited to the Igbo language because none of the major languages of Nigeria has in its structure the attribution of genders to nouns (Alabi, (2009), Emordi, 2004).

Though the teaching of French encounters problems of various kinds, which are not insurmountable; French language proficiency for Nigeria has produced practical economic and social benefits. In these areas, we must mention the practice of translation and the integration of people from the sub-region. This instance justifies the few articles and contributions published during the period covered by our presentation.

Johnson (1999:81-85) points out that the art of translating is not only a vocation for many teachers of French, it is also a profession practiced in conference centers in the country and especially for Pentecostal churches which have affiliates in neighboring French-speaking countries. To meet these expectations and financial reporting obligations, the Department of European Languages of the University of Lagos included in its academic program, after several years of attempts, the training of translators and interpreters in 1991 for the first time. She did not forget to pay tribute to the founding fathers of the professionalization of translation and interpretation in Nigeria: Wole Soyinka, Ekundayo Simpson, Olga Simpson, John Olaoye Abioye, Modupe Bode-Thomas; the French Government which initiated the translation program in Okigwe/Uturu and the Alliance Française for the degree programs in translation.

It should be noted that after three to four successful sessions, the training of translators and interpreters at the University of Lagos could not attract enough anticipated staff. One of the constraints linked to the failure of the program is the professional status attributed to the master's degree granted to students. On the contrary, centers such as the Alliance Française and the French Village in Nigeria where non-university diplomas are granted continue to attract enough translators wishing to become professional. The Nigerian Institute of Translators and Interpreters (NITI), under the tutelage of Professor Simpson Ekundayo, for a decade has brought together university teachers and professionals who have joined the Nigerian Association of Translators and Interpreters for annual refresher programs to fill the gap and respond to the needs and aspirations of clandestine practitioners of the profession.

It is necessary for us to emphasize that translation and interpretation (especially English/French or French/English) are an administrative or professional vocation very necessary for the survival of Nigerian diplomacy aimed at the international axis. Obisakin (2012:537-547) shares with us his experience as a translator and interpreter serving his country for thirty years. He used his mastery of European languages, including French most of the time, in the attempt to bring together regional and intercontinental governments of Nigeria from 1981 to 2010. Thus, the practice of translation and interpretation (English/French or French/English) not only puts bread on the table for Nigerian practitioners, it also serves as a tool of diplomatic ascendancy for the people and their government internationally.

Anglophones and Francophones will never be able to understand each other if they do not compel each other to put in place structures of true bilingual integration within geographically homogeneous communities such as the West African or African sub-region. For Ariole (2011: 264): *In order for ... African countries to fully benefit from the blessings coming from such an arrangement, French and English will be the two*

languages that will serve as languages of communication and research.

The linguistic threat vis-à-vis the teaching and practice of French is expressed by Obieje and Adebisi (2012:240-256) when they question the state of the teaching of French and Chinese in Nigeria. They assert that ... *economic considerations are paramount, as they have facilitated the penetration of Chinese in contemporary Nigeria.* It is shown that even if French remains unquestionably the second foreign language of Nigeria, the presence of Chinese which is anchored on the economic world power of China will take the front if the actors and the partners of the promotion of French do not avoid complacency. Added to this caveat is this reality at the University of Lagos where French is experiencing a considerable decline in favor of Chinese at admission times. Faced with a weak presence of the French authorities in this university, the administrative authorities do not hide their preference for aggressive Chinese linguistic propaganda in the establishment. China, among other encouragements, sponsor two of the four years of study that covers the duration of the bachelor's degree program in Chinese at a Chinese university. Finally, the only preparatory year program that encourages studies in French is discouraged, because it is no longer profitable for the university (sessions 2013/2014 and 2014/2015).

Conclusion

The phenomena exposed in this paper regarding the practice and teaching of French in Nigeria persist and are still the main subjects of discourse at academic conferences of associations of French teachers at all levels of language training. The teaching of a foreign language is always structured on a precise objective basis to ensure communication. Oral communication is especially favored; the environment of what is missing for the majority of French learners in Nigeria. The communicative approach that is often proposed in recent French methods is ignored by the Nigerian Ministry of National Education. Most textbooks designed without the assistance of the competent authorities responsible for

primary and secondary schools present a mechanical formula which does not provide for any audio-visual material. Even when audio aids are provided, most of the time they are not used for the benefit of the learner. The goal of French teaching in Nigeria will only be achieved if all stakeholders come together to design French methods for all cycles of teaching and training in French. Key players such as the Nigeria Association of French Teachers (NAFT) and the University French Teachers' Association of Nigeria (UFTAN) need to present a common front to advance strong arguments for the establishment of a state-sponsored workshop for documentation and the design of practical works that will encourage, in the short and long term, learners and professionals to communicate in French. Moreover, as Owhotu (1999:38) has suggested: We believe that it is no longer a question of whether computers are desirable or useful but how to train teachers and students in them; what types of software and media will be most adaptable to the widest audience of learners depending on their needs.

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