

## **CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF TEACHING AND LEARNING RUSSIAN IN NIGERIA: THE UNIVERSITY OF LAGOS EXAMPLE (1970-2022)**

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### **Abstract**

*The study of Russian language at the University of Lagos for over 50 years calls for reassessment of the programme with a view to determining its challenges and possible prospects. When the course was first introduced at the University of Lagos, it was with anxiety over its sustainability and success being the only university in Nigeria apart from the University of Ibadan where the course is taught and learnt. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 which depleted the vibrancy and usage of the language amongst the states of the former Soviet Union, there is the need to reassess the programme. In this work, therefore, efforts are made to critically analyze the study of the language from the time of its introduction in the University of Lagos's educational curriculum till date with a view to ascertaining its level of growth and efficiency when compared with how it is taught in Russia, its problems and relevance in this 21st century. Phenomenological methodology is used to assess the teaching of the language so far and to ascertain the problems inherent in the study of the language in the University. At the end, recommendations for improvement in teaching and learning the language in the University are given.*

**Key work:** Russian, immersion, Russkiy Mir, University of Lagos, programme.

### **Historical Background of Teaching and Learning Russian at the University of Lagos**

Russian, as a sub-unit, was introduced into the Department of European Languages, University of Lagos in 1970/71 academic session: first, as a minor but; in 1983, it became a full-fledged degree programme (Ade-Ojo

2006). The first set of graduates in Russian, who were three, completed their degree programme at the end of the 1986/87 session. The number has been on the increase in subsequent years. In 2003/2004 session alone, 34 students were admitted (Chukwube, 2010). Presently, the Department has 59 students studying the language in the University of Lagos including 26 others who are in Russia undergoing their compulsory immersion programme. It is expected that the students' population will further increase in subsequent sessions.

A landmark in the study of Russian in Nigeria is the efforts of the National University Commission (NUC) to modify and draw Benchmark Academic Standard for Postgraduate Programme in Russian Languages in Nigerian Universities. This is a welcome development and the University of Lagos is counting on this opportunity to establish its postgraduate programme in Russian. It is expected that the University of Nigeria will also utilize the opportunity. It is important to note that hitherto, Russian is studied at the postgraduate level only at the University of Ibadan.

### **Why Study Russian Language?**

The imperative of studying Russian language in the modern day Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. There is need for Nigeria to be an integral part of the Global Village in which multilingualism is a sine-qua non and in the context of the leadership role that Nigeria has to play in international politics and diplomacy, by virtue of her population, natural resources, economic resilience and political relevance, the importance of major European languages cannot be relegated to the background in the curriculum of Nigerian Universities, whose central objective is to prepare and provide the much needed manpower for the development of the country and also for the sustenance of its administrative machinery. The Russian language, as the lingua franca or the transnational language of the old Soviet Union is a world language which impact in international politics and diplomacy, scientific research works, technology, industrial

development particularly steel. The formulation as well as the exploitation of political ideologies is universally acknowledged to have Russian technology.

For Science students, knowledge of Russian is a catalyst for the purposes of reading in the original ‘technical’ or ‘scientific’ literature related to their field, since a large quantum of materials are published in the language and since much is often lost in translation (Chukwube, 2010). This is where the Professors of Engineering in the University of Lagos have always shown their importance.

Apart from being beneficial to science students, it is also vital to arts students and scholars and lovers of literature too. While it is true that great names in Russian literatures are known in the West through translation (Tolstoy, Chekhov, Dostoyevsky etc.), there are others whose works are still being sought after by scholars realizing that the depth of thought and message can only be reached in the original language of pronunciation. Alexander Pushkin, who started the ‘Golden Age’ of Russian literature in 1825, for instance, is not as widely known as Tolstoy and Chekhov. This is not because his work is of less importance, but because it has always been difficult to translate him adequately from Russian. (Odunuga. 2005).

Going beyond learning Russian as an academic subject and for a limited purpose, there are those who have to use the language on a wider scale. Epitomizing on globalization that depicts the world as a village, there are today wider contacts between Africa and Russia in areas of economy, education, commerce and culture which has necessitated and attracted the interest of both the federal and some state governments of Nigeria to encourage many of its citizens to utilize some of the sponsored programmes of the course, especially in Russia. This is expected to yield the needed professionals in different areas of specialization, including interpreters and translators for the country. The after effect of the Russia-Ukrainian conflict is another factor. Russia is presently seeking closeness

with many African countries with Nigeria inclusive. They are eager to establish a lot of language centers in Africa and today, the University of Lagos is a beneficiary of having the Russkiy Mir Foundation, A Russian language center in the University.

### **Programme of Russian language at the University of Lagos**

Russian language at the University of Lagos is a four-year programme designed in such a way that three years of the programme are done in Nigeria while one year immersion programme is undertaken in any recognized university or institute in Russia. On the basis of this arrangement, students spend years one and two in the Department of European Languages and Integration Studies, University of Lagos while the third year is spent abroad in Russia and the fourth year is completed in the University of Lagos University here. At the inception of the course in the Department, admission rate was low with sometimes not more than three candidates admitted. This, however, changed tremendously with time as earlier indicated.

The benefits of the immersion programme cannot be over emphasized. According to Odunuga (1981), as a result of an agreement signed in the 80s by the then Vice Chancellor of the University of Ibadan, Professor S. Olajuwon Olayide with the then Director of the Pushkin Institute of Russian Language, Moscow, Professor V. G. Kostomarov, students of the University of Ibadan had the privilege of having the immersion program in the Institute. They were later joined by their colleagues from the University of Lagos to form the contingent from Nigeria in the Institute. As contained in the agreement, all travelling expenses, including tuition and other learning materials were provided to the students by the Soviet authorities at no cost. Apart from that, students received monthly stipend from the government for their up-keep. All these support, however, ceased with the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 as a result of inability of both the University of Ibadan and the Pushkin Institute to renew their agreement. That witnessed a period

of students spending their four years back there in the Department without the immersion programme. This was the situation till the year 2005 when a sort of understanding was reached with the authorities of Volgograd State Technical University to enable students of the University of Lagos to do their programme in the university. A mutual understanding between the Russian Unit of the Department of European Languages, University of Lagos and its counterpart from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka made it possible for students of both universities to study in Volgograd for the immersion programme for some period of time. Presently, Russian students of the University of Lagos undergo their immersion programme at the Ivanovo State University, Russia.

### **Prospects of Russian Language in Nigeria**

It is important to note that Nigerian students have benefited immensely from the two institutions in Russia. Apart from the one-year programme for undergraduate students, the Pushkin Institute in Moscow has succeeded in training a couple of Nigerian students at the Masters and Ph.D. levels. These Nigerians presently constitute the bulk of the teaching staff of the language both at the University of Lagos and Ibadan. All these, unfortunately, ended with the disintegration of the Soviet Union. It is now a Herculean task for many parents to send their children or wards to study in Russia as the cost of tuition and upkeep of each student is conservatively put at \$6,000 including transport cost. In reacting to this, both the University of Nigeria, Nsukka and the University of Ibadan have now made it voluntary to embark on the project. Students who cannot afford such amounts are allowed to undertake the entire four-year study in their Departments.

This was applicable at the University of Lagos till recently when the Department made the one-year immersion programme in Russia compulsory. As it stands now, all students must travel to Russia on immersion program or be allowed to change their course to French, which attracts less cost, or defer the program to the time it will be

convenient for them to go for the immersion.

There is no gainsaying, however, that the Department of European Languages and Integration Studies, University of Lagos has a lot to boast of. In the area of academics, the University can boast of having produced a lot of lecturers, including a Professor, who are teaching in the University and elsewhere. A lot of former students of the University of Lagos are gearing up to join the system as soon as the post graduate program is allowed to take off in the Department. A good number of graduates of Russian are holding sensitive positions in the Nigerian military. Some are faced with the challenges of translating manuals of military equipment procured from Russia. There are also others in Communication Industries and are working effectively in their different areas of authority. There are also some in the Banking, Aviation and Business professions.

### **Problems of Teaching and Learning Russian at the University of Lagos**

In spite of the remarkable progress already attained in this field of study in the last forty years, Russian language at the University of Lagos has been confronted with some noticeable bottlenecks. In the first place, it is unspeakable that after about forty years of teaching Russian in the university, the expected awareness of the curriculum was only achieved recently. Russian as a course still remains strange to many Nigerians, even by including the elite. Students who study the course sometimes feel ashamed to identify with the course and oftentimes claim to be studying other courses instead. Ignorance of the benefits awareness of the course is another factor. In many instances, until recently, the bulk of students admitted to study the course are those who failed to meet up the requirements of their courses of first choice, hence such students feel inferior to their contemporaries, especially at the beginning of their studies; but as soon as the students advance in the course, they regain full confidence and even become of it at the later stage. To check this trend

therefore, a lot of awareness needs to be created and the onus falls on both the lecturers and the students. Efforts must be made by the lecturers to communicate even outside the classroom setting in the language among themselves and with the students who are at the later stage of their studies. This will help the students build confidence in themselves and be proud to be associated with the course. Students themselves must try to always communicate in the language not minding the obvious mistakes they could make.

The dearth of teachers of the course has been hindering the growth of the course and consequently, the spread of the language to the nooks and crannies of Nigeria. This brought about the extinction of Russian language no sooner than it was created at the University of Ife. Another instance is the University of Nigeria, Nsukka which for a long time had only one lecturer with the assistance of some adjunct lectures were teaching the course. According to the Student's Handbook of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literary Studies, University of Nigeria, the Department started the teaching of Russian language in the 1960s with the presence of two Russian citizens, Mr. and Mrs. Zarenoff, who later left for the USA. Ade-Ojo (2006) posits that till the early 90s, the University of Lagos had only two lecturers teaching the course. He, however, failed to mention that the University had some foreign lectures who regularly came from Universities in Russia to assist them. Presently, the university can boast of six qualified and well-trained lectures in its coffers. Although this is a remarkable improvement from the past, it is still a far cry of the needed manpower to adequately handle the programme. More so, now that the University is considering the request of the Department for the Russian Unit to kick-start postgraduate programme in the discipline.

Adequate provision of teaching aids has always been a problem in the university. Till recently, the university cannot boast of well-equipped language laboratory and library for the course. Where available, books are very old and there are no availability of modern journals. The

Department had no computers with Russian keyboards, video sets, DVD sets, cassette players and films. Although the University of Lagos is now determined to overhaul the entire system, similar efforts in the past yielded only minor results.

As earlier indicated, another nagging setback in the study of Russian in the University of Lagos is the immersion programme. Because of the astronomical cost of sending students to Russia, which is entirely borne by the parents of the students involved, many students shun the travel and as such are denied the obvious benefits of learning in a native speaker's setting. This consequently increases the task of few available lecturers in the Department. Today, many students who cannot afford the cost of travelling to Russia are allowed to change to French. And in some cases, withdraw naturally.

In the past, there was a Russian Cultural Centre in Lagos that had quite reasonable number of modern electronic materials that were used in projecting the culture of Russia. The library of the centre was made available to students and the reading public. Historical and cultural films were shown at the centre during Russian public holidays and students were opportune to take advantage of it. The Centre went moribund even before the disintegration of the Soviet Union. It is, however, heart-warming to note that with the linkage of the Russian Embassy in Lagos, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed in 2012 between the University of Lagos and the Russkiy Mir Foundation; a non-governmental Agency interested in building and safeguarding Russian Studies and Culture all over the world to establish a functional Language Centre in the University of Lagos. Suffice it to say that this understanding materialized in 2014 when the Foundation brought large consignment of Russian books and other learning materials to the Department of European Languages and Integration Studies of the University of Lagos thereby establishing a Centre in the university. This is the first and only of such Centers in Nigeria.



In preparation for the Centre, some lecturers of both the Universities of Lagos and Ibadan were sponsored to a two week international symposium and workshop in 2011 at the famous Friendship University in Moscow where new techniques in teaching and using teaching materials were exposed to them. Currently, Russian students of the University of Lagos are beneficiaries of the project with the expectations that students of University of Ibadan and possibly Nigeria, Nsukka will be included in the nearest future.

Russian lecturers in the past used to go to the Pushkin Institute in Moscow for refresher courses for a period of one to two months in summer. It was sponsored by the then Soviet government. The importance of this can only be imagined. The exercise was long stopped and MAPRIAL, an umbrella that unified and occasionally assembled teachers of Russian language all over the world is either extinct or less heard about in Nigeria. Then it was also a means of publishing internationally for teachers of the course. The effect of this is that Russian lecturers are sometimes kept in the dark of the dynamics of teaching the language. This is detrimental to the students and it retards the pace of growth of the language in the country. The good news now, however, is the availability of high quality of International Journal of Russian Studies based in a University in Turkey which is affording lecturers of the course from many countries to publish and express their experiences and views on the language.

### **Recommendations**

The aforementioned setbacks in the learning and teaching of Russian call for solutions. The growth and spread of the language in Nigeria, and indeed, in Africa should not be the paramount concern of the University of Lagos alone, but also, the Russian government. It is always the pride of native speakers of a language to see such languages spread and since both countries benefit from the learning of the language, it calls for the joint efforts to uplift the language. The Russian government should

increase the number of its annual scholarship awards to Nigerians and a reasonable percentage specifically allocated to the study of the language. On its part, Nigerian government should encourage the University of Lagos and indeed other respective universities through better funding and sponsorship of some programmes related to the teaching of the language such as conferences and seminars. The Russian government can still afford to send experts to the University of Lagos and other Nigerian Universities and once again bring back the course to vibrancy.

The Russian government can also through some agencies and organisations donate recent books and other teaching aids to these universities as it had once done. Such gestures would spur the students towards more dedication and confidence. At the same time, Russian authorities can help to defray part of the expenses incurred by the students in the immersion programme.

The summer courses for Russian language teachers should be reintroduced in Nigeria and sponsored by concerned authorities of the countries. This will boost the moral of teachers and make them globally compliant. New entrants will be attracted into the profession and lecturers of the course would see themselves as being equal to the challenges.

New associations or organisations that would act as an umbrella for unifying teachers of the language should be formed, and if possible, at international level. And where the formation of new ones seem impossible, efforts must be made by the lecturers to identify themselves with the existing ones. It could be recalled that in 1972, teachers of Russian agreed that regular seminars and symposia be arranged on a West African level and in the Accra Congress of West African Modern Languages Association (WAMLA) in 1977, teachers of Russian formally inaugurated the West African Association of Teachers of Russian. There is also MAPRIAL – the world Association of Russian Language Teachers. Teachers of Russian in Nigeria should endeavor to see that the

possible benefits of these associations do not elude them.

### **Conclusion**

The study of Russian language at the University of Lagos has been very productive in the five decades of its existence, more is still expected. For the language to have survived in the University under the aforementioned setbacks is commendable. There is no doubt that the language has come to stay in Nigeria as it is currently maintaining third position after English and French among foreign languages studied in the country. It is our convictions that when the suggested steps are taken to promote the language; Russian will ever remain relevant and greatly sort for. With this in view, the University of Lagos is irrevocably committed to the teaching of Russian with competence, creativity, resourcefulness, dynamism and total dedication. Again, the relevance of the language in the 21st century cannot be overemphasized. For the fact that Russian language remains one of the languages of the United Nations, notwithstanding the disintegration of the Soviet Union, it is still very relevant.

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