



## Issues bordering the French language in Sub-Saharan Africa: Nigeria as a case study

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### Abstract

**Aim:** Nigeria is a country in South Saharan Africa, and this study looked into questions concerning the French language used there. Some of the reasons why the French language may or may not have become widely spoken in certain African countries, particularly Nigeria, are discussed.

**Method:** To accomplish this, a qualitative method was employed.

**Findings:** The findings suggest that, alongside other issues, focusing on psycho-pedagogical issues is the most effective way to address the issues highlighted in this paper. Making French mandatory in all levels of education, especially in public schools in Nigeria, is the best way to ensure the survival of French in Sub-Saharan Africa, especially in Anglophone Africa. In light of the arguments made in this paper, the French language across all disciplines should be reconsidered, with special attention paid to its role in Nigeria's public school system.

**Implications/Novel Contribution:** The purpose of this paper is to examine Nigeria as a case study of a borderland language in Sub-Saharan Africa, specifically in West Africa. This demonstrated that one of the major factors working against the survival of the English language in Sub-Saharan Africa is the widespread lack of recognition and appreciation for it, especially in the English-speaking countries of the region.

*Keywords:* Issues, French, Language, Second official language

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### INTRODUCTION

To the south of the Sahara Desert are the countries known as Sub-Saharan Africa. It has been established the United Nations that there are 54 independent states in Africa. Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco are the five non-Sub-Saharan countries that makeup North Africa. Those 49 nations south of the Sahara Desert are collectively known as Sub-Saharan Africa. There are a total of 54 countries in Africa: Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cape Verde, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of the Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Leso (Abimbola, 2016; Danladi, 2013; Hilao, 2016).

The Francophone regions of Sub-Saharan Africa are also the focus of this paper. Countries in Africa where French is an official language taught in schools and Anglophone countries in Sub-Saharan Africa where French is taught in schools as a foreign language or is recognized as a second official language. During the colonial era, which spanned the late 19th century and the middle of the 20th century, French was introduced to many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. Because of the French colonial period's extensive contact with Africa, many Africans speak French. There is a continued need for French even after colonialism ended in these African countries. The introduction of French in Anglophone countries has many causes, including politics, geography, and more (Danladi, 2013; Wu, 2017). French has had a significant impact on the advancement of African countries.

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

It is not possible to consider the issues bordering French in Sub-Saharan African countries using Nigeria as a case study without taking into the educational systems in Francophone and Anglophone countries. In Francophone countries, the attitude of the French was to create French citizens rather than French-speaking Africans. This led to teaching French in Francophone countries as the official language (Aladekomo, 2004; Boonyarattanasoontorn, 2017). In Anglophone African countries, the British see English as a world language not necessarily gearing to any one part of the English-speaking world. In Francophone Sub-Saharan African countries the school system is divided into two parts: the primary section consist of 6 years (3 years each) ending in Certificat d'Etudes Primaires Elementaires (CEPE) examination. The secondary section consists of 4 years ending in Brevet d'Etudes du Premier Cycle (BEPC) examination or 7 years ending in the baccalaureat examination as a pre-requisite for entrance into universities. In Anglophone Sub-Saharan Africa, there are various types of school systems (Araromi, 1996). It is divided into the primary section which consists of 5 -9 years and the secondary section of 5 to 6 years Junior Secondary School (JSS), Senior Secondary School (SSS), Technical/Vocational Education) in order to acquire Ordinary Level:O/L in Senior School Certificate Examination (SSCE) or General Certificate Examination (GCE). After this, there is advanced examination such as Higher School Certificate or GCE at Advanced level: A/L, Diploma of various kinds, Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) eading to 4-7 years of University education. Two Anglophone countries like Sierra Leone and Liberia ravaged by war or epidemy are restructuring their educational system to fit into a standardized form. Sierra Leones education is 6:3:3:4 system which is 6 years of primary school, 3 years of Junior Secondary School, 3 years of Senior Secondary School and 4 years of University. In Liberia, the system of education is 6:3:3 which is 6 years of primary school, 3 years of Junior school, 3 years of Senior school/High school, Vocational(Teacher Training), Vocational (Technical) (Technical education) and of College (University). In Ghana 6:3:3:4 which is 6 years of primary school, 3 years of Junior High school or Middle Education (French is taught). 3 years of Junior Secondary School (JSS), 3 years of Senior Secondary (SSS), 4 years of tertiary Education (though in some tertiary institutions can last from 3 to 4 years and some courses can last up to 5 or 7 years). A secondary school system can be in form of a technical education.

The explanation above is given in order to ascertain when French was introduced into the educational systems in Sub-Saharan Francophone and Anglophone Africa as an official language, second language, second official language (Igboanusi & Pütz, 2008). In Sub-Saharan Francophone African countries, French is an official language and it is taught in schools as a second language (L2) changing from L1 to L2. In Anglophone countries like Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, Gambia, Sierra Leone, the mother tongue or English is used as a medium of instruction in primary schools because pupils speak a wide variety of mother tongues. In Nigeria especially, French is not taught at all in government primary schools (Federal and States) except in a few private schools. It is only introduced in a few government secondary schools and a private schools because of non-availability of teachers of French. This is one of the issues bordering the language in Nigeria (Ihenacho, 1981).

Some people believe that a higher population of Africans speak French but the number of Africans who speak, read and write French are not up to 20%. Presently only a tiny percent of millions of people in these countries can read, write and speak French. Africa may in future be the only continent compared to others where there may be the greatest number of French speakers because as more people get educated so will there be more French speakers.

## METHODOLOGY

### **Issues bordering the French Language in Sub-Saharan Africa**

#### *Teaching methods*

In Francophone Sub-Saharan African countries, the method of teaching French varies from kindergarten to university levels. In some countries such as Togo, Chad, Senegal, Benin, Gabon, Cote d'Ivoire, the mother tongue or local language is taught at an early stage; French is taught much later but may not fully be implemented. Children are faced with their mother tongues or native languages which make it difficult to learn French. In countries such as Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Eritrea, Burundi, Guinea Bisau, Mali, Malawi, Democratic Republic of Congo (North kivu), Mozambique, some parts of Northern Nigeria, all because of several reasons such as poverty, decrease

in in population growth, school enrolment, age, internal instability, conflict and war, weak governance, corruption. There are poor teaching methods of teaching French, (Nunan, 2004). At advanced level, audio visual or laboratory method is used though students may still find it difficult to comprehend the lesson. The laboratory method is based on repetition. In Ghana for instance, method of teaching French is based on repetition and translation of words.

#### *Teaching facilities*

Some schools in Francophone and Anglophone West Africa do not have facilities or adequate facilities such as satellite, television, projector, VCD, radio etc. to teach French. Textbooks which are used in some schools are either outdated or difficult to get in the bookshops. Even when there are French textbooks in some school libraries, students may not have access to them or they (textbooks) may be too high for their (students) levels and they may find it difficult to understand either because the teacher does not teach the language well or the culture is too foreign to them.

#### *Societal acceptance*

French is L2 in Sub-Saharan West Africa because it is either a second or foreign language. French is more accepted in Francophone West Africa such as parastatals, establishments, banking sectors etc, because the citizens are colonized by French and it is the official language. In the markets and lower levels of the society, African dialects or African French (French which is mixed with African words) are spoken.

In Ghana, according to Nunan (2004) Parents and students recognize the opportunities created with sufficient knowledge in French. Most students, teachers and other stakeholders recognized the importance of the French language. They went further to stress that even if there is a growing demand for the French language, access to qualitative French teaching and learning, non-availability and deployment of teachers hinders a higher participation levels of students at all levels in taking French as a subject or course in the public education system.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **The Case of Nigeria**

Nigeria is an English speaking country because she was a colony of England before she gained her independence in 1960. Nigeria is a country in Sub-Saharan West Africa which is surrounded by French-speaking West African countries; the republic of Benin in the West, Cameroon in the East and the republic of Niger in the North. French is a foreign language in Nigeria; foreign because it is from France. It is a language which majority of the Nigerian population (educated and uneducated) do not speak or know nothing about. French is a language which is learnt in the classrooms in Nigeria. It is spoken mostly by

- i. Only the qualified teachers of higher institutions.
- ii. Some teachers in secondary schools who are exposed to travelling out or rubbing shoulders with the native speakers.
- iii. Students or pupils who are born and bred in French countries but settled in Nigeria.
- iv. People who have travelled to France or Francophone countries. The third and fourth categories can speak but cannot write a single correct sentence in French.
- v. Some students who are studying in higher institutions.

Some of the fifth category of speakers, exhibit language interference while speaking. For example, a child would naturally mention table in French as in English.

French is very vital to Nigerians because of her geographical location. In Nigeria, the method of teaching French from Private Kindergarten, primary schools to private and public Junior Secondary schools is as the discretion of the French teacher if there is no existing syllabus which are not detailed enough to enable the students of such levels to communicate or if the teacher is not aware of any. It also depends on the availability of the French teacher. In schools where French is taught, the translation method is used. Students only offer French because it is compulsory though French is not taught in all Junior schools. According to Anyanwu, Ezejiofor, Igweze, and Orisakwe (2018), students translate a whole passage without having an iota of the meaning of such a passage. The teacher translates words while teaching and most times pupils and students are given exercises and assignments either from comprehension passages to translate or what is not related to the lesson. At tertiary level, French is

taught in French departments though methods vary but geared towards one goal of exposing the students to the socio-cultural and political lives of the French speaking people, equipping the students with adequate knowledge to be able to communicate with the French world.

On 14th December 1996, the late Nigerian Military Head of State, by his Minister of Education at the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, that French would soon be introduced as a second official language in the country, to be studied compulsory in the primary, secondary and post-secondary levels of our educational system. The policy, according to the Minister, would in a short time make Nigeria to become bilingual (Igboanusi & Pütz, 2008). They further that the and late Abachas speech and later decision led to the formal recognition of French for the first time as a second official language in Nigeria. Immediately after that declaration, recognition and adoption of the policy, elaborate preparations were made for its commencement. Eminent French scholars from Nigeria universities were assembled and mandated to write the curriculum for the subject in the primary and post primary institutions nationwide. Unfortunately, after Abachas demise, the policy was completely abandoned and it has remained only on paper ever since.

On 30th January 2016, the Minister of State for Education, Professor Anthony Anwukah announced again that the Federal Government was soon going to reintroduce French as the nations second official language. The reason why French was introduced in Nigeria by the Federal Government is to enable the country interact easily and more effectively with its francophone neighboring countries and participate effectively in international conferences and seminars. The declaration made some policy makers to include it in the National Policy on Education (NPE) as a teaching subject.

It is worthy to note that the state and value accorded to French in Nigerian educational system by the Educational Policy Makers has not been very satisfactory when compared to other subjects or courses offered at our three levels of education. On the status of the French language education in Nigeria as stated in the NPE, Aladekomo (2004) observes that it is just a mere paper work. To him, it was partially defined. He opines that French is not only optional at secondary schools but a non-vocational subject. Many primary and secondary schools (public and private) in Nigeria do not offer French. Even those Nigerians who study French and have academic or professional degree in the language usually do not see many people to speak it to. In secondary schools only few pupils have interest in French owing to the fact that teachers are not available to teach it or that they are available and do not teach it well. Araromi (1996) cited by Igboanusi and Pütz (2008), accurately describes the plight of French students and French language as a subject in the secondary schools in Nigeria.

Quite often, a class of between 35 and 40 students begin the learning of French in the secondary school only to thin out to 4 or 5 by the time they get to senior secondary classes where they have to choose their examination subjects.

In Nigeria, French language is still being looked down upon. Some parents prefer their children to study medicine, law, engineering etc. than French. The number of speakers is few compared to the population in Nigeria. One would expect that as a second official language one third or nearly half of the population should be able to express themselves in French but this is not the case. French has not developed to such state. In schools where French is taught, some students leave the classes because they find the subject boring especially when it has to do with French verbs and culture which are different from ours.

Some French teachers did not receive adequate training to know and understand the methodology of teaching it. They are supposed to be models for their students to imitate; they must know how to speak the language before they are able to teach it. As a result of inadequacy on their part, their students tend to perform poorly. Finally the idea of declaring French as the second official language in Nigeria is not a bad one. The State and Federal Government has a lot to play in ensuring that French is considered as Nigerias second official language.

## **CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

Language is central to the development of an equitable educational program that leads to self-fulfillment and societal transformation. French is a language that is widely spoken in Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa and less spoken in Anglophone Sub-Saharan Africa. This paper was designed to bring out the issues bordering the French language in Sub-Saharan Africa especially in West Africa using Nigeria as a case study. It revealed that lack of recognition and importance of the language is one of the contributory factors militating against the language

in Sub-Saharan Africa especially in the Anglophone countries. French is a language that is not widely spoken in some parts of Sub-Saharan West Africa especially in the Anglophone countries. The best way to tackle the issues raised in this paper is to give a great attention to psycho-pedagogic issues while taking into cognizance the other issues. To ascertain the survival of the French language in Sub-Saharan Africa especially in Anglophone Africa, French should be made compulsory at all levels especially in public schools in Nigeria. This paper has called for a re-examination of the French language at all levels of education especially in Nigeria. What is needed is to avoid rigidity and the use of outdated methods which are not relevant to current methods of teaching. There is no how Nigerians will not mix with their West African French speaking neighbors by expanding their horizons to such environments and other French environments and cultures in the world.

This paper recommends the teaching of French in Sub-Saharan Africa especially in Nigerian schools. If Nigeria must quickly be developed scientifically and technologically, it will be necessary to encourage a solid teaching and learning of French in schools. No country can speak of technological transfer without paying attention to the instrument of learning which is language. In order for French to be an effective subject at the primary and secondary school levels, the Federal and State Government and owners of private schools should work hand in hand with the French government in the supply of current teaching materials to schools. A committee should be set up to review from time to time the books and materials used in schools. Government should set up bodies to monitor the full implementation of compulsory teaching and learning of French from the primary to the senior secondary schools. The State and Federal Government should put in place policies which will sensitize and give adequate orientation to parents, students and the entire Nigerian citizenry on the importance of French to the country. This is because when Nigerians know the importance of French in the country, they will fully embrace the language.

It is worrisome that teachers teach using the grammar translation method. Teachers should be exposed to pedagogical workshops in order for them to know how to use the communicative approach in the class. By so doing, they will know how to create tasks for their students to engage in which will lead to their competence in the language Nunan (2004). French experts in Nigeria tertiary institutions should be invited to Abuja to restructure secondary school curriculum which will be based on the communicative abilities of the students in the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. French should be taught at public primary schools and taken at the National Common Entrance Examination for primary six pupils just like English and other subjects (Sanni, 2015).

Workshops on French teaching through the communicative approach should be organized for primary and secondary school teachers of both public and private schools. If such teachers undergo Center for French Teaching and Documentation (CFTD) workshops, they will be taught how to plan their lessons in French. When the steps highlighted above are taken into consideration and emulated, parents, students and the Nigerian society will begin to take French language seriously and this will go a long way in enhancing the French language and French teaching will be rewarding at the end.

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