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THE CHALLENGES OF INTRODUCTION OF FRENCH LANGUAGE AS A CORE SUBJECT IN THE NEW 9 YEAR BASIC EDUCATION CURRICULUM STRUCTURE

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Abstracts

It is not an overstatement reiterating that French Language is an indispensable language in Nigeria and the world over, considering the numerical strength of the speakers of the language, its cosmopolitan status and because of its usefulness as an invaluable language of communication at different international forum such as United Nations summit, ECOWAS summit and African Union (AU) summit (French remains an indispensable language) in the recent time, the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) announced its intention to elevate the status of French language from being a vocational elective subject to a core subject right from middle basic education curriculum to upper basic educational curriculum. The decision of the NERDC is a laudable and a welcome development considering the necessary invaluable status attached to the study of French language to boost international and diplomatic relations between Nigeria and her neighbouring Francophone African countries (NPE 2004). We are of the opinion that the programme with its beauty and laudability would face some challenges that would stand as a clog in the wheel of its successful realization. This paper therefore sets out to address the challenges of according a compulsory status to French language from primary four to Junior Secondary School in the new nine year basic curriculum structure.

The 9 Year Basic Education Curriculum

Change is a product of necessity and this is undeniable in all human undertakings or endeavours. Every prospective government hammers on the need for change as a basis canvassing for people's support for voting them into elective offices. In this regard, the education sector is not an exception in this question of change. Nigeria at one time or the other had reviewed her curriculum to meet the contemporary needs and conform to changes in the global economy and scientific technological advancement in the world. The reason for proposing a new curriculum to replace the old one according to Nigerian Educational Research Development Council (NERDC) is because the present primary and Junior Secondary School curricula can no longer meet the goals of basic education and moreover because the existing school curriculum can no longer meet the expected needs of the world of work of the learners in a rapidly changing world. The provisions went further

to say that the new curriculum intends to fill the gaps in the old curriculum basically by redefining core subjects and also by replacing the obsolete ones with new ones. This is what led to elevating French language from vocational elective to a core subject from middle basic Education Curriculum to upper basic education curriculum.

The Status of French Language in the 6-3-3-4 Education System

The status of French language in the 6-3-3-4 education system calls for critical attention and observation. Even though the government of the late Head of State, General Sanni Abacha made a policy declaration making French language the second official language in Nigeria in a summit held in Ouagadougou in 1996, all the efforts to implement the policy in the 6-3-3-4 education system proved abortive and unproductive. To further corroborate this assertion, Odeyemi (2001) in a study conducted to ascertain the position of French language in the new 6-3-3-4 system of Education maintained that French is not accorded the rightful position and it is an optional subject in the schools. As a result of its optional status, French language appears unpopular on the school time table. Despite the fact that it was declared as second official language in Nigeria, many school principals do not see the reason why French language should be included on the school time table because they could not see any benefits inherent in the study of the language and its contributions to the careers of their students.

Olatunji (2000) in a research conducted on the problems and prospects of adoption of French language as the second official language in Nigeria concluded that government does not know the immense benefits derivable from the adoption of French language as the second official language in Nigeria.

The stakeholders, the educational managers and the entire public need to be sensitized on the values inherent in the study of French language in our various schools. The level of awareness of the Nigerian populace of the adoption of French as the second official language in Nigeria is minimal. In a study conducted by Olatunji (2000) on the level of awareness of the secondary school principals of the declaration of French as the second official language in Nigeria by Nigerian government, it was reported that many of the principals interviewed claimed not to be aware of any policy declaring French language as the second official language in Nigeria and a language to be studied in our schools. This lack of awareness on the part of the principles informed the non-inclusion of the subject on the school time table.

The problem of absolute disregard for the study of French language has been an age long problem and it has its root from the

insensitivity of Nigerian government to implement the policy pronouncement earlier made by the government. The government had good intention by declaring French as the second official language in Nigeria. Many countries had declared French as the second official language in the country. But the level of commitment and dedication towards the implementation of this program differs from one country to the other. It suffices to say that the status of French language in the 6-3-3-4 education system suffers a major set-back among the array of subjects on the school time tables. The direct consequence of this is total lack of motivation on the part of the French language teachers and high rate of drop out on the part of the learners? In a survey conducted by Ebi (2009) on the level of under-utilization of the French teachers in thirty five secondary schools in Makurdi, it was reported that only ten French teachers out of thirty five teachers in thirteen secondary schools visited were forced to teach other liberal arts subject. Many of these graduates or NCE graduates of French in these schools are said to prefer teaching other subjects to French language because of the discouragement they experienced from the school principals and the ministry officials. To further throw more light on the unpopularity of French language in the 6-3-3-4 education system, Ajiboye (2005) opined that the chances of survival of French language in a country where the question of national language and mother tongue education is yet to be resolved is very slim. Parents of the learners fail to know the benefits of learning additional foreign or second language addition to English language which is the official language in Nigeria. They are satisfied and contented with their ward's ability to speak English language fluently and they do not realize the appreciable value embedded in acquiring both English and French as two major languages of international standard, languages of commerce, international trade, diplomacy and international relations and languages of strong cultural heritage.

Oyetade (2001) observed with dismay the general attitude and commitment of school Heads and Ministry of Education in deploring science teachers and English language teachers to schools to make up for the shortage of teachers in these fields of study. He further reiterated that the Parent's Teachers Association (PTA) also consolidate the efforts of the Ministry of Education by personally using their financial strength to engage part time teachers to teach some of these subjects since they are considered highly important and are believed to have bearing on the chosen careers of their wards. If this level of commitment and focus is extended to the study of French language, its status in the 6-3-3-4 education system would have improved in no small measure.

The challenges (of Making French Language a Core Subject in the New 9 Year Basic Education Curriculum)

In appraising the quality of an education system or curriculum, one needs to look critically into the philosophies of such an education system and see whether they are value oriented or not. Looking critically at the nine year Basic Education Curriculum structure, one would come to the conclusion that the philosophy is highly catching and bends towards inculcating valuable skills into the learners. The philosophy says that every learner who has gone through a year of basic education should have acquired appropriate levels of literacy, numeracy, manipulative, communicative and life-skills as well as the ethical, normal and civic values. Our concern in this philosophy lies in the area of communicative skills which the curriculum intends to inculcate into the learners. (We make bold to say that) Communication in this regard makes reference to the language oriented subjects which are invariably the English language and the French language which appeared under the group of core-subjects in the middle education curriculum and upper basic education curriculum. In addition to the philosophy of the 9 3 4 education system, one cannot but observe one of the basic features of the nine year basic education curriculum especially the one that concerns the recognition of French language as a core subject in the curriculum. Suffice to say that the elevation of the status of French language from a vocational elective to a core subject is one of the features that differentiate the 6-3-3-4 education system from the nine year basic education curriculum.

The decision to make French language a core subject in the nine year basic education curriculum would be highly welcomed and embraced by all stakeholders in the field of second language education but it would be of immense value if we look critically at the following challenges of introducing French as a core subject in the new system.

Shortage of trained or competent teachers of French: The shortage or absence of professional or trained teachers of French language could mar the realization of the dream of adopting French language as a core subject in the nine year basic education programme. No educational system can rise above the level of its teachers (NPE, 2004) revised edition. In other words, no matter how laudable an education programme is, the professionalism and the competence of the teachers in the particular education system should not be underestimated. There is no gainsaying the fact that French teachers are in short supply in various schools across the nation. These boils down to the value or status attached to the study of French language in Nigeria. One cannot but affirm that the shortage of French teachers in schools is as a result of lack of graduate teachers or NCE teachers of French and

because many of these teachers are not directly favoured by the deployment policy of the Ministry of Education. Oyetade (2001) is of the opinion that the Ministry of Education and the school heads deliberately favour the deployment of teachers of core subjects such as English and the sciences to schools thereby constituting an impediment to the teaching of French language in school. It is also confirmed that in some cases, some public schools use the strength of parents, teachers-association to engage teachers for some of these core subjects if the teachers are not available. In addition to this issue of inadequate supply of French teachers in schools, one could easily observe that few French graduate teachers that are posted to some of the schools are not allowed to teach French language but rather teach other liberal arts subjects (Araromi, 1987). In a survey carried out by (Ebi 2009) on the under utilization of French graduates in Nigeria, secondary schools in Nasarawa State, it was found that out of thirty five French teachers observed in thirteen schools only ten of them teach French language in their various schools. Others are forced to teach other subjects. The problem of shortage of French teachers in our schools is a major and fundamental problem and it could becloud the achievement of this lofty dream of adopting French language as a core subject. The government has to wake up from her slumber and address the issue of short supply of French teachers in the school. It is high time government stopped paying lip service to the implementation of French language as the second official language in Nigeria.

Subheading-orientation for teachers, head teachers, educational managers and the general public is of immediate concern to the government if the government is ever serious about making French language a core subject in the nine year basic education system. The general public needs to be sensitized on the importance of studying French language as a second language in our new education system. There is need for value re-orientation on the adoption of French language as a core subject in our schools. The government recognizes the need to interact and communicate with our neighbouring Francophone West African countries on socio economic and political spheres (NPE, 2004). That is why the adoption of English language as a core subject in our system of Education is a step in the right direction). Therefore, the government needs to organize conferences, seminars, symposia and workshops to sensitize the stakeholders in the educational sector on the value of French language in Nigeria. Many principals who failed to include French on their school time tables did so as a result of lack of sensitization or awareness on their part on the status of French language

in Nigeria. Circulars could be sent to schools to notify them of the current status of French language in the new system of Education.

Subheading poor funding could serve as hindrance to the pursuance of the goal of making French language a core subject from primary four to junior secondary school. There is need for training and retraining of French teachers to enable them perform excellently in the task of imparting the knowledge of the language to the learners. Deficiency in the area of the methodology of teaching the second language and poor knowledge of the subject always raise their ugly heads when the issue of poor performance or high rates of drop out in the French language is discussed. Therefore the French teachers need overseas training which requires the collaborative efforts of both the Nigeria government and the host country France. Both in the past and recent times, the Nigerian government and the French government had signed a bilateral agreement to promote the teaching and learning of French language in Nigerian schools. The latest agreement signed by the French government was on Friday 20th July 2008 which saw the French government dolling out the sum of 319.6 million naira for the support of French language in Nigeria (Saturday Tribune, 21st of June 2008, page 9). In a nutshell, there is need for both internal and external alliance to provide financial succor for the actualization of the adoption of French language as a core subject in the nine year basic education programme.

Pressure from the indigenous languages: Nigeria is a multi-ethnic and multilingual state judging by the number of languages that exist across the length and breadth of the country. The total number of languages in Nigeria is still a misery to the expert in the field of language education and also the linguists and this phenomenon has generated great controversies among the researchers in the field of language education. Osaji (1979) puts the number of languages in Nigeria at 400. Nigeria being a multi-ethnic country with about 200 distinct ethnic groups co-existing as independent and distinguished entity in terms of language and culture would always encourage unity and cohesion among these diverse ethnic groups. This position is maintained in the provisions of National Policy on Education (NPE, 2004) where it was stated that every Nigerian child is compelled to learn additional integration extended to the learning of indigenous languages is also constitutionally backed as stated in the 1989 constitution of the Federal republic of Nigeria sub section 19 (4) which states among others that "the government shall encourage the learning of indigenous languages. Ogike (2005) also opined that the creation of organizations that promote the learning of indigenous languages thereby portraying those that go against their

verdict as unpatriotic, relegates the status of French language to the background in view of the foregoing, Nigeria has a long way to go in order to implement the policy of adopting French language as a core subject in the nine year basic education programme especially when the issues of the lingua franca in Nigeria is yet to be resolved and the campaign for adopting of mother tongue education is on the increase. Therefore all hands must be on deck if the government is serious about the implementation of the laudable programme of making French compulsory from primary to secondary school. Nigeria is on sound international footing through the learning of a foreign language such as French language would not be effort in futility.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have considered the nine year basic education system and its innovation which centers on adopting French language as a core subject both at the middle basic education curriculum and the upper basic education curriculum. We are of the view that the government has taken a step in the right direction, judging by the value of French as a language of international relations and diplomacy. One cannot but affirm that there is no laudable programme without limitations or challenges that could serve as hindrances against the realization of its lofty aim. We make bold to say that problems such as lack of competent or professional language teachers, insufficient funds, lack of proper orientation and awareness campaign and pressure from the indigenous languages among others may stand as stumbling block on the actualization of making Nigerian populace French and English literate through the recognition accorded French language as a core subject in the nine year basic education system.

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