
LEARNING FRENCH IN NIGERIA: BENEFITS AND THE CHALLENGES

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Abstract

The study of foreign languages plays a pivotal role in fostering cross-cultural communication, enhancing cognitive abilities, and improving career prospects in today's globalised world. In Nigeria, a linguistically diverse nation with over 500 indigenous languages, the importance of French cannot be overstated. As one of the official languages of the African Union and the United Nations, French provides significant advantages for Nigeria, given its geographical proximity to Francophone countries and the growing influence of France in West Africa. This article examines the multifaceted significance of French in Nigeria, exploring its historical context, educational implications, economic advantages, and sociocultural impact on Nigerian society. Additionally, it highlights existing challenges in promoting French, alongside suggestions for bolstering its presence within the educational curriculum to prepare future generations for an interconnected world.

Introduction

The complexity and richness of Nigeria's linguistic landscape is reflective of its diverse ethnic groups and cultures. Given the varied languages spoken, learning a foreign language such as French becomes an essential tool not just for communication but for fostering better understanding among diverse populations. With the rise of globalisation, there is a growing need for individuals who are proficient in multiple languages, allowing them to navigate international relationships and trade. Historically, Nigeria has maintained a multifaceted relationship with France and Francophone nations. The legacy of colonisation brought multiple influences which continue to shape the country's socio-economic landscape. This paper discusses the importance of French as not only a foreign language but as a bridge to opportunities within Nigeria and beyond.

Historical Context

The introduction of French in Nigeria can be traced back to colonial times when French traders and missionaries established connections with local communities. However, it gained formal recognition later, particularly in the educational sector, through the influence of the French-speaking African countries nearby, such as Benin and Niger. According to Adebayo (2017), the recognition of French as a language of diplomacy and commerce has led to its inclusion in Nigerian educational curricula since the 1960s.

The role French plays in diplomacy is significant. Nigeria's foreign policy actively encourages the promotion of regional integration through the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU), both of which use French as an official language. This regional influence signifies that proficiency in French can lead to greater diplomatic engagements and cooperative efforts among neighbouring countries.

Educational Implications

The educational landscape in Nigeria is crucial to the promotion of French as a second language. The Nigerian government acknowledges bilingualism as a necessary aspect of education, advocating for the inclusion of French from primary to tertiary levels. The National Policy on Education (2004) identified the teaching of French in schools as a priority, emphasising the need for students to acquire competence in the language. Despite government recognition, challenges remain, including a lack of qualified teachers, inadequate resources, and varying degrees of interest among students. Ojo (2018) highlights that many students perceive French as a difficult language, deterring them from pursuing it further. Consequently, it is imperative to adopt innovative teaching methodologies—such as immersive learning techniques and technology-assisted education—that engage students and ease their learning experience.

Economic Advantages

The relevance of French in Nigeria is strongly linked to the economic opportunities it presents. As Nigeria is a part of the West African region, which encompasses numerous French-speaking countries, the ability to communicate in French opens avenues for trade, investment, and business partnerships. According to research by Makinde (2020), the French-speaking population in West Africa is projected to grow significantly, underscoring the necessity for Nigeria to prepare its workforce to engage with this expanding market.

Moreover, international organisations and multinational corporations often seek proficient French speakers for employment. French language competence is frequently regarded as a valuable asset in sectors such as tourism, diplomacy, and international business. As Ndidi (2019) asserts, the demand for French speakers in Nigeria is a reflection of the increasing collaboration between Nigeria and Francophone countries in various industries.

Sociocultural Impact

The sociocultural benefits of French are equally noteworthy. Proficiency in French enables Nigerians to access a broader spectrum of cultural materials, including literature, music, and film from French-speaking nations. This cultural exchange fosters greater empathy and understanding across cultures. Languages are inherently tied to identity, and the learning of French allows for the exploration of Francophone cultural heritage, which in turn enriches Nigeria's own cultural tapestry.

Furthermore, the ability to communicate in French enhances social cohesion by bridging gaps among Nigeria's diverse ethnic and linguistic groups. Ongoing efforts to promote French as a unifying language can potentially reduce socio-political tensions, thereby contributing to national stability. As Ajayi (2021) suggests, understanding and sharing in one another's cultures can foster better relationships among various ethnic groups within Nigeria.

Challenges in Promoting French

Despite its many advantages, promoting French in Nigeria encounters several hurdles. The perceived status of the English language as the language of the elite often overshadows the significance of French. Consequently, French is often viewed as a luxury rather than a necessity. Additionally, the inadequacies in the training of French language teachers contribute to the challenges faced in effective language dissemination.

Moreover, the competition from other languages spoken within Nigeria complicates efforts to prioritize French. The multitude of indigenous languages requires a balanced approach to language education that considers the needs and aspirations of the local population. As highlighted by Adetunji (2022), a comprehensive language policy is needed that integrates both native and foreign languages while promoting multilingualism.

Furthermore, some students in the Nigerian higher institutions find themselves by accident in learning French as a course. These same set of students have never encountered the latter language even at their lower educational levels. In that same vein, some undergraduate students in most schools in South West do have this following sentence in the mouth: "French no be my Papa language no Mama language". With this statement, learning and promoting French will definitely be difficult in a country like Nigeria where many dialects are overshadowing this "Oyinbo" language called French. Furthermore, having this type of mindset about French language that "I cannot know it even though I put more effort in learning it", with this already the individual will lose interest in French.

Strategies for Improvement

To ameliorate the stated challenges and bolster the teaching and learning of French, a multi-faceted strategy must be adopted. Firstly, enhancing teacher training programs is essential. Providing resources and professional development for French language educators can significantly raise the standard of French instructors in Nigeria.

Secondly, fostering partnerships with Francophone countries and institutions can yield beneficial outcomes. Initiatives such as student exchange programmes, cultural immersion experiences, and collaborative projects can create a more stimulating environment for students to learn French.

Moreso, programmes like "A toi le micro Naija" organized by the France Embassy in Nigeria and coordinated by Mrs Magaly Losange (Cooperation Attaché for French Language) and Mr Sébastien Bédé (Scientific and University Cooperation Attaché) help students in making the learning of the French language more effective. Through that programme, they help students in their listening aspect, their ability to speak fluently and better. Finally, they also help students in their written aspect.

Furthermore, through the writing of the "DELFI EXAM" at the ALLIANCE FRANÇAISE" many Nigerian bilingual students were recruited for a teaching opportunity in France. Organizations like ECOWAS, UNO, UNICEF, etc... can also recruit such people with the DELFI Certificate.

Additionally, the utilisation of technology can revolutionise language learning. Integrating language apps, online courses, and virtual classrooms can make learning French more accessible and engaging for students. Encouraging media consumption—such as French films, music, and podcasts—can further immerse learners in the language and culture.

Conclusion

The importance of French in Nigeria is underscored by its potential to act as a catalyst for social integration, economic growth, and cultural enrichment. As Nigeria continues to navigate a complex global landscape, the need for proficiency in multiple languages—including French—grows increasingly critical. By prioritising French education within the curriculum, investing in teacher training, and promoting cultural exchanges, Nigeria can harness the full potential of this language to create a more interconnected society.

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