RELIGIOUS ISSUES AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING IN NIGERIA: A MATTER POLITICS OR POLICIES?

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Abstract

This paper tends in the first instance, to look critically at the issue of religion, then other issues like: attitude of teachers, parents and students as they affect foreign language learning before looking at politics and government policies as factors that mar or make the teaching/learning of foreign language in Nigeria.

This is because, when it comes to foreign language learning, especially French and Arabic in Nigeria, issues abound; as a matter of fact, most Nigerian students are almost already divided along Christian and Islamic religion lines. Some believing that French language is meant for the Christians while others are of the opinion that its Arabic counterpart should be for the Muslims.

As a form of conclusion, answers were provided to the question of whether if it is politics or policies all in a bid to lay to rest, the popular and erroneous bone of contention that a particular language belongs to a particular religion.

Introduction

Prior to the taking over of schools by the Nigerian government in the early 1970s, the country's schools according to Igwe (2013) were originally established by religious groups, mainly Christian missionaries from Europe who used them as tools for proselytizing and converting the Nigerian "heathens". The curricula were faith-based and taken over by religious indoctrination, dogma, and brainwashing. Education, either western or Koranic was used to get Nigerians to embrace Christianity or Islam. *It was not an avenue for self-realization or intellectual growth* (Igwe: op cit). Even today, and despite governments' efforts to instill secular ideals and values into public education, the Nigerian educational system has retained its religious character-Islamic in the north and Christian in the south and perhaps, French for the Christians and Arabic for the Muslims. Achebe (1958: 124-125) may not have been completely wrong when he said that the white man was very clever after all; that *"he came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart"*

As the world is gradually transformed into a 'global village', many more Nigerians either out of sheer interest, or one kind of necessity or another, or even out of compulsion, are starting to learn French and Arabic languages. That is why, nowadays, one notices an accelerated evolution concerning international languages generally. According to Sanni-suleiman (2008:55), more and more people want to learn French, English, Arabic, German or Russian, not because of the interest they have in literature or in the users of those languages, but to have access to the modern world of science, technology, art, culture and entertainment.

This is also because, ‘the development of man in all areas depends on the use of language’; and ‘as a result of the numerous functions of language within the society, people aspire to learn more languages or become bilingual / multilingual so as to communicate wider and more effectively across their immediate speech communities’ (Dada 2001:56, 74).

Although, ‘French and Arabic have the status of priority foreign languages’ (Soyoye, 2010: 34) in Nigeria and ‘French is even our second official language’, Ajiboye (2010: 92-93). But before the development, English has always been recognised as the only official language in Nigeria and is the language of administration, instruction and communication in every sector of the country. In today’s demanding world, promoting the study of French and Arabic languages in our country becomes more and more necessary because there’s constant need to interact with our sister Arab and French countries in Africa and other parts of the world in order to tap from their abundant cultural, economic, technological and social resources.

The Federal Government realizes the importance of education to nation building and development and it is the reason why the aims and objectives of the Nigeria’s national education are documented to be vigorously pursued. The government in its bid to reinforce its stand, states in the National Policy on Education (1998) that ‘since education is a dynamic instrument of change, this policy will need to be constantly reviewed to ensure its adequacy’.

Government, in its effort to further salvage education, particularly the teaching and learning of languages has four institutions involved in language activities in Nigeria. These are: The Nigeria French Language Village, Badagry – Lagos State which is involved in building the capacity of Nigerians, stakeholders, legislators, public servants and private individuals in the French Language. The Nigeria Arabic Language Village, Ngala – Borno State which addresses the issue of Arabic language culture while the Institute of Nigeria Languages in Aba deals with teachers’

capacity building, to provide capacity for teachers to cope with teaching Nigeria languages in schools or to cope with teaching teacher educators. Finally, there is the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council's Language Development Centre in Abuja which promotes the Nigerian languages.

In spite of the above, some scholars are still of the view that government policies are largely responsible for some of the issues in our schools today. For example, Awoyinfa (2013) opined that policy somersault had been the bane of education development in the country. The general belief is that, government ideas are laudable but it has not yielded desired results and has been receiving criticisms with suggestions for effectiveness.

Really, religion may have taken its toll on our education, particularly the teaching and learning of foreign languages and our policies may not be adequate enough as opined by Awoyinfa above; but yet, politics may also not be ruled out as a major factor militating against the success of Arabic and French language education in Nigeria since politics and man are more or less two sides of the same coin.

Foreign language teaching and Learning in Nigeria

The importance of teaching and learning of Foreign languages is very important and that of French and Arabic is more essential because they are considered according to Soyoye (op cit) as having the status of priority foreign languages in Nigeria,. According to Ahmad (1999), it is an undeniable fact that language is the main means whereby people communicate. Also, it is ironically the main means whereby people fail to communicate. Those who travel frequently, study, govern or sell would understand more easily that language could be a barrier to communication. Whether the activity is tourism, research, government, business, or data dissemination, the lack of a common language can severely impede progress and can halt it

altogether. Although, communication problems of this kind must happen thousands of times each day, but very few become public knowledge. Publicity comes only when a failure to communicate has major consequences such as strikes, lost orders, legal problems, lost of possible job opportunities, or fatal accidents-even, at times, war.

The choice of languages to teach in the schools of any country is usually determined by the language policies of the country. Normally, these languages are recognized according to their importance and relevance in relation to national development or international integration. For this reason in particular, the language policy in Nigeria recognizes English as our official language and some local languages as national languages and as such, the teaching of English and these languages are favored in our schools.

Coming after English and these local languages are those considered as foreign languages but whose teachings are largely optional. This latter group of languages includes French and Arabic which in fairness is the most favored of all the foreign languages. The establishment of the Nigeria French Language Village, Badagry – Lagos State and the Nigeria Arabic village, Ngala – Borno State in 1991 and 1992 respectively and the subsequent emergence of French as a second official language in Nigeria can attest to the obvious facts.

In Nigeria, as in many other countries of the world, developmental forces as earlier mentioned above have a definite and direct bearing on foreign languages acquisition for politico-economic, scientific and technological, as well as human development. Though, this would not come so easily or cheaply as it's usually characterized among many other issues by the primitive and erroneous belief that a particular language is tied to a particular religious sect. It is rather sad to note just like Ahmad, (ibid.) that:

"*there exists a rampant misconception about Arabic language as synonymous with Islam due to the former's great affinity with the latter. Although, Koran was revealed in Arabic, it does not mean that the language should be exclusively circumscribed to the Muslims. Arabic is a language on its own right. It is very useful for diplomacy and business activities in the Arab world in particular and the Islamic world in general".*

As for French language, it is our official language in principle; it is also recognized as a vital subject like Arabic and other subjects in our secondary school curriculum but policies made about it as posited by Sabo (2010:8) are not put into practice. She further reiterated through the words of Emmanuel Aito (ibid.) that: ' though French has curiously appeared in some places (e.g Quid '88) as official language of instruction in school' but its teaching is not taken seriously because, not many government schools effectively teach it from Junior Secondary School 1 (JSS1) to the Senior Secondary School 3 (SSS3) .

Students generally, particularly those in rural schools also face limited learning resources, teachers face fluency challenges, and children are sometimes taught with un-engaging teaching techniques. As a result of these difficulties, students miss out on the benefits of learning a (foreign) language. Until these challenges are addressed, our students will likely continue to face educational and development challenges.

Fortunately for us, the associations of scholars and teachers of French and Arabic languages have been relatively active in Nigeria. As strong lobby groups according to Obanya (1992), these associations have succeeded in influencing language curricula. For example, the Nigerian Association of French Teachers (NAFT) was largely instrumental in modernizing the secondary school examination syllabus in the 1970s, by pressing for and developing a large audio-oral form

of examination which in its turn has had desirable wash back effects on classroom practices. While similar pressures were exerted by Nigerian teachers of Arabic in the 1980s.

At every point and time, the peculiar nature of language education should always be put into consideration since the success of most foreign language learning programs as posited by Kaulfers (1955:159) sometimes owe their origin to the initiative of parents, sometimes to the voluntary services of a high-school teacher of foreign languages, occasionally to the initiative of an elementary school teacher willing to carry a foreign language club or class as an extra activity, and at times to the initiative of a sympathetic principal. Once the needful is done, it becomes easier to formulate and implement useful policies.

Language policies in Nigeria

According to Mahfouz & Waheed (2009:32), language is one of the chief means by which a person learns to organize his experiences and thought. For any nation not to be in linguistic wilderness therefore, it requires a coherent and dynamic policy to facilitate its (language) education which is very important. Nigeria, like many other developing nations is not left out in the formulation of useful policies in a bid to chat a new course for language education; hence the need for a time to time formulation and revision of The National Policy on Education as documented in 1977, 1981, 1998, 2004, 2007 and 2013 respectively.

National Policy on education (NPE) can be defined as a national guideline for the effective administration, management and implementation of education at all tiers of government. Wike (2013:2) described it as *a statement of intentions, expectations, goals, prescriptions, standards and requirement for quality education delivery in Nigeria*. A nation's policy on education as stated in the NPE (2004) is government's way of realizing that part of the national goals which can be achieved using education as a tool. The review of these policies becomes imperative due

majorly to fundamental changes in socio-economic and political structures or the tempo of development activities on-going in both the global and local contexts. The key challenges however, rest in how to effectively coordinate activities and interventions, as well as how to strengthen and deepen collaboration among the tiers of government and various stakeholders through appropriate policy guidelines, monitoring and quality control.

Many authors at different times have discussed matters arising from the various editions of Nigeria's education policy but, we, out of sheer interest have retained the views of Ibukun and Aboluwodi (2010). According to them, issues arising from the 1977, 1981, 1998 and 2004 editions are:

1. The inculcation of national consciousness and national unity
2. The inculcation of the right type of values and attitudes for the survival of the individuals and the Nigeria society
3. The training of the mind in the understanding of the world around; and
4. The acquisition of appropriate skills, abilities and competences both mental and physical as equipment for the individual to live in and contribute to the development of the society.

Since language is our primary interest here therefore, one could say that the third and fourth objectives above were partly instrumental to the birth of the policy statement which states that: *For smooth interaction with our neighbors, it is desirable for every Nigerian to speak French. Accordingly, French shall be the second official language in Nigeria and it shall be compulsory in schools*. National policy on education (2004:4)

It was also in line with the above policy statement that the current National Policy on Education had made French one of the core subjects in our JSS and SSS level of secondary education. This new policy as contained in the general principles of the National Curriculum in French (2001) is

informed by the need for Nigerians to acquire competence in a language which is a major international language of science, commerce, industry, diplomacy and technology. And you will agree with us that Arabic, not specifically mentioned though could be said to have been covered by considering its significant impact on world politics and affairs.

One may go as far as saying that the above policy statement or perhaps the eventual setting up of the taskforce on the French language project and the formulation of new French language policy making French a compulsory subject in school and a second official language in Nigeria had indeed sensitized Nigerians on the need to learn French and other foreign languages like Arabic, Chinese, German, Portuguese etc.

However, the likes of Awoyinfa (ibid.) who posited that policy somersault had been the bane of education development in the country may not have also been wrong considering section 51, 55, 91 and 97 of the 1979 constitution which according to Dada (ibid: 59) states that *the business of the national assembly shall be conducted in English, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made therefore.* This may also mean as Oyetade (2002) sited by Dada (ibid: 57) has rightly remarked that attempts are been made in one way or the other to harness the linguistic resources of Nigeria for national development, but much has not been achieved not necessarily because of her multilingual nature but because, as it were, policies are made to fail or designed in such a way to make implementation difficult because of some obvious pitfalls built into them.

If not, how do we explain the fact that curriculum at the lower levels of our education had kept on changing perhaps in order to meet the requirements of education for relevance, useful living and/or prepare products of the secondary school system for higher education but the university

system in Nigeria probably arising from its semiautonomous status remained largely unaffected by the wind of change in the other (lower) levels of the education system?

The actual problem

As we have taken a look at the situation of foreign language teaching in Nigeria bearing French and Arabic in mind, the question of what really are the issues militating against the smooth teaching and learning of learning of foreign languages is yet to be answered. But hopefully, the following points may further help us in shaping the humble stand we may have taken from the inception of this paper and they are:

The national language politics

The national language politics did not just start today. Brock-Utne (2001) in his work cited Obanya (1980) in a related work where he was quoted to have said that *it has always been felt by African educationists that the African child's major learning problem is linguistic. Instruction is given in a language that is not normally used in his immediate environment, a language which neither the learner nor the teacher understands and uses well enough*.

Brock-Utne in the above quotation no doubt has foreign languages in mind. Thus, the fact that French and Arabic are also imported or transplanted languages means that they coexist with other languages in Nigeria and had to share the normal or regular functions of natural languages or to be restricted to specific domains of use. But because most people seem to recognize the many benefits of learning a foreign language and so it looks like all is well for foreign language education in Nigeria. Perhaps, this is the reason Ajiboye (ibid: 4) also remarked that:

"Some observers might even say that more than enough attention has been given to it, thereby implying that funds and materials going in the direction of foreign language education are out of proportion to its real value for national survival. Others might even say that, with the question of

mother tongue education and that of national language still unresolved, it is foolhardy to venture into any warming up of efforts in favor of foreign languages. It is important not to dismiss with the wave of hand these observations especially as they may be part of the opinions strongly held by those in authority"

This is not to suggest here however, that having a national language is not important but to rather say that, a national language does not fulfill the same functions as a foreign language. We are simply of the view that it is better to use a language of wider communication (LWC) often foreign as posited by Fishman (1971), so as to bring the nation together, rather than the adoption of an indigenous language, giving it all the necessary development and using it as a language of administration and instruction.

Quality and quantity of teachers

A language teacher ought to be very active and resourceful; he should be able to employ the use of active learning strategies. This will make the classroom a dynamic, ever changing environment in which students have a voice, and also allow students to view teachers as people who are flexible enough to take risks in the classroom. A language teacher must bear in mind that his willingness to take risks in the classroom increases the likelihood of his students doing the same which is one of the tricks of learning language. The students must always be involved and engaged through various pedagogical activities because, students stay interested and learn more from class when teachers use many different techniques to involve them in the learning process. This could as well be corroborated by the opinion of Chickering & Gamson, (1987) where they stated that:

"Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much just sitting in classes listening to teachers, memorizing prepackaged assignments, and spitting out answers. They must talk about

what they are learning, write reflectively about it, relate it to past experiences, and apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves."

Unfortunately, foreign language teaching in Nigeria is beset by the problem of teachers and their qualification. The teachers are unnecessarily overloaded and it is very common here to see a whole school having just one French or Arabic teacher. Those who would claim to have one could boast of part-timers while many don't even have at all. The more reason Ajiboye (op. cit) added that the case has often been reported of teachers who turn out to be 'cheating' simply because it is discovered sometimes too late that their only qualification for foreign language classroom is that they are foreigners. On the other hand, the teacher may not be blamed always as language ability requires specific training and there is no automatic transfer from one to the other. *Since no education system may rise above the quality of its teachers* (NPE, 2004:26), he or she will simply need much more than this accident birth and language ownership.

Policy summersault

Many times, policies are articulated as a result of the need to address the persistent gaps in policy provisions and implementations but yet, policy somersault had also been the bane of education development in the country. For example, part of the objectives of the primary education according to section C (19) (a) of the NPE (2013) is to "inculcate permanent literacy, numeracy and the ability to communicate effectively" and yet, French language isn't listed among the subjects of primary classes 1-3 which has seven subjects all together. Arabic is 7th on the list but specifically indicated as optional.

Similarly in the same edition of NPE, French is consistently provided for as the 7th among the list of subjects meant for Primary 4-6 and junior Secondary School, while Arabic which occupies the last position on all the lists is clearly listed as optional. Meanwhile, section 4 (19)(b)(i) of the

NPE (2004) clearly provides for languages and are listed in the order of: (a) language of the environment (b) English (c) French (d) Arabic. Because Government also claims to appreciate the importance of language as a means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion, the 1998 and 2004 editions of the National Policy on Education on pages 9 and 4 respectively stated that French *shall be made compulsory in primary and Junior Secondary Schools but non-vocational elective in at Senior Secondary Schools*. But the much we have in the 2013 (most recent) edition of the NPE is that *every child shall be taught in the mother tongue or language of the immediate community for the first four years of basic education. In addition, it is expected that every child shall learn the Nigerian Language.*

We are neither encouraging the government to be static nor discouraging the learning of local Nigerian languages, but, it is believed that better results can be achieved if the government is more consistent in its Policy formulations and implementations. The government is largely responsible, not just for the formulation, but also for the success or failure of various educational and non educational policies as this is buttressed by Dada (Op cit : 57) through the words of Oyetade (2002) that he quoted thus:

"Attempts have been made in one way or the other to harness the linguistic resources of Nigeria for national development. But much has not been achieved not necessarily because of her multilingual nature but because, as it were, policies are made to fail or designed in a such a way to make implementation difficult because of some obvious pitfalls built into them"

The school politics

The school as a training ground, coupled with the way the curriculum is being managed goes a long way in accounting for the success or otherwise of French and Arabic education. The school

also determines the place of language in the whole scheme even though it cannot but function in accordance with the government's dictated policies.

The fact that many other subjects are competing alongside French and Arabic for a place in the curriculum could imply that the teacher may have to go as far as lobbying to secure a favorable place in the school timetable; if by chance he gets, he is also left with the non conducive nature of the time which makes him end up in not achieving most of his set down pedagogical objectives. This, as opined by Ajiboye (Op cit) is also further complicated by the unguided conviction of parents about career limitations in foreign language which at the end of the day, makes tertiary classrooms for these languages empty.

If at the secondary school level, French and Arabic are maintained as electives in the curriculum, there are chances that the aim of introducing them in the first place will be jeopardized. As electives, they are to be seen as only tangentially complementary to the total educational landscape of the child. As things are, the child is even free not to study either of them. The immediate implication according to Ajiboye (2005), is that he might never have the benefit of a foreign language in the technical sense throughout his life. Even though the new educational system is edged towards technical, vocational and professionalization, it may be possible for the young technician who has learnt refrigeration or hotel management, for example, to read simple manuals or refer confidently to certain menus in these languages, not to talk of taking interest in going to countries where these languages are spoken to develop himself in this career, even if the offers are next to free.

Undue parental influence

Parents are stakeholders because they have a stake in the school and its students, even though this could be a personal, professional, civic, financial interest or concern in the school. Parent's

engagement is considered vital to the success and improvement of a school. The involvement of the broader community of the school with it can improve communication and public understanding and allows for the incorporation of the perspectives, experiences and expertise of participating community members to improve reform proposals, strategies, or processes.

They also mar or make the policies depending on where they fall at a particular point in time – parent or policy maker. Though, the fact remains that their involvement and that of the broader community of a school with it leads to higher academic performance and school improvement. When schools, parents, families and communities work together to support learning, students feel more encouraged, attend school more regularly and take part in higher-level programs. This involvement is a key to addressing undue preferences for some subjects or school drop-out crisis and strong partnerships foster higher educational aspirations and more motivated students.

Parent, family and community involvement can have a different meaning for different people considering the fact that they also form a larger part of the elites who Obanya (2005:2-3) accused as being responsible for the death of educational reforms. According to him, *this class makes the education policies, but educates its children outside the official programs that it has itself authored. The wider community thus gets the signal that educational reforms are for the poor only. This is one strong explanation for the failure of educational reforms on the continent, i.e. their rejection by the ordinary citizen as being inferior.* They are indeed a major factor in this our (political) context.

Students' attitude

By this, we refer to the attitude of students vis a vis language learning; i.e, their opinion or general feeling about foreign languages and their conscious or unconscious behavior in the course of learning them. It's a cliché in this our side of the world that students' commitment to

learning is below average. Many a time they are openly not willing to make extra efforts to acquire the knowledge of foreign languages, many times they throw opportunities away and other times they are not willing to make sacrifices. Imagine someone whose parents have been committing money and time to his or her studies and all (s)he does is keep playing truancy. Or worse still, someone who is meant to attend an immersion program but would rather be at a youth camping that has nothing to do with foreign language learning.

Attitude makes the difference and that would be one of the reasons most of the researches on the issue have concluded that student's attitude is an integral part of learning and that it should, therefore, become an essential component of second language learning pedagogy (Sevil et al: 39). There are several reasons why research on students' attitudes toward language learning is important. First, attitudes toward learning are believed to influence behaviors, such as selecting and reading books, speaking in a foreign language. Second, a relationship between attitudes and achievement has been shown to exist, all based on the works of Kaballa & Crowley, (1985) and Schibeci and Riley (1986) (ibid). Attitudes influence achievement and not the vice versa.

Another issue is the pessimistic mindset of some students, there's this notion that foreign languages are hard to learn and many conclude even before starting they can never understand it. By the time someone already has this kind of erroneous or subjective opinion of the subject, you can be sure the teacher will only be busy wasting his precious time in class.

Conclusion and recommendations

So far, we have taken a brief look at a number of issues ranging from religion and politics to the politics in the national policies on language education as it concerns the learning of foreign

languages in Nigeria bearing French and Arabic in mind. At this juncture, where then does the problem lie? Is it in the policies or the politics?

Religion and other issues in the acquisition of foreign languages in Nigeria are matters of politics and not policies because, it is as clear as it is stated in the words of Oladosu (2002) sighted by Mahfouz and Waheed (Op cit) that, even the calls to convene a Sovereign National Conference where various ethnic groups/regions would decide on re-structuring the country or probably correcting what has been branded “the mistakes of the founding fathers” have been deliberately ignored by successive Nigerian rulers for no reason other than politics!

In a nut shell, the problem of Nigeria’s education system generally, or matters arising in the learning of foreign languages in Nigeria is not in the policies, but the wrong conceptualization of the process of implementing such policies. Nigeria's language education policies may require taking into consideration the "Nigerian factor" or those features that make the country what it is; and that will not be to suggest that it is the bane of our language education development. Therefore, the way forward for this great country is to engage policy makers in a forum of rethinking their strategies for development. Most of them are essentially very beautiful and, if carefully studied, it is possible to emerge with a rank of strategies and their implementation. A framework of implementation cutting across the entire education sectors should also be drawn. Of particular importance is the stringent keenness on implementation of the priority strategies. Implementation obviously goes along with sustainability. Any policy or project that lacks implementation and sustainability, however good it may sound on paper, is as good as dead. This is the type of Conclave that Nigerian policy makers must engage in.

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