



French Language: A Catalyst For Economic Development In Nigeria

¹Agbagbatu Samuel Oghenekaro & ²Nwaukoni Anthonia

¹Department of General Studies,
Delta State University of Sciences and Technology,
Ozoro, Delta State, Nigeria
Phone number: 08165881611/ Email: samgbatu@gmail.com

²Department of Languages,
School of General Studies,
Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku, Delta State, Nigeria
Phone Number: 08035996873/ Email: anthonianwaukoni@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Nigeria at the moment is plagued by a large number of issues ranging from political to socio-cultural and most especially economic problems. In a multilingual society such as Nigeria completely surrounded by only francophone countries; we have to reinforce our business strategies with our neighbours in particular and the international community in general. The question that comes to mind is with what language are we going to engage them? With the problem of economic recession in the country, communication barrier with our neighbours and in this era of globalization where everyone needs to have a control of at least two international languages, French language will no doubt will be the catalyst for economic development to the nation. The paper x-rays the huge economic potentials that French language can bring to the development of Nigeria. The study in one of its findings projects that French language is capable of boosting development and reducing drastically unemployment and widespread poverty a situation which has resulted to so much deterioration in the standard of living of Nigerians. The paper in one of its recommendations suggests amongst other things that the Franco-Nigerian cooperation should be reawakened and vigorously energized to realize its set goals for national development.

Keywords: Language, unemployment, multilingual society, economic recession, development

INTRODUCTION

Human beings socialize, buy and sell, visit each other, exchange ideas, research to overcome problems inside and outside their communities. These activities could be done because human beings are able to transmit their feelings effectively through the use of language. Language is a tool for social development. Language according Ferdinand de Saussure is an instrument for communication. According to Moeschler and Auchlin (2006:19), language is a social phenomenon, a code for interaction by members of a speech community. It is language that is responsible to a very large extent for whatever we say or do including development. According to J.L. Austin's speech acts theory (Austin 1962), an individual acts on his environment when he uses words. Ndiribe (2016) asserts that we perform an action each time we use language.

No country ever develops without a language. In Nigeria, a number of challenges face the people especially economic problems. It has been opined by many economists and political analysts that bad governance has been the greatest cause of Nigeria's economic woes. Every effort to better the situation

has failed over the time. In a world of economic recessions, tough economic measures are put in place to ameliorate the situation. To proffer solution in this type of critical condition, people look inward and outward to try to get a solution.

Looking at Nigeria completely surrounded by only francophone countries, we need to push our businesses beyond our borders to try to solve the problem. What language are we going to use to communicate with these neighbours to solve our problem? It is definitely French language of course not Chinese, not German, not pidgin. It will not only help us as a catalyst to spur Nigeria's development but also a means of engaging with our francophone neighbours and the international communities especially the francophone countries in this era of globalization where one international language is not enough to handle the linguistic demands of globalization.

The objectives of the study

- (i) To highlight the ways in which French language can help to achieve economic development in the country Nigeria.
- (ii) To enumerate some areas where French language can create massive employment
- (iii) To highlight modalities with which French language can drastically help to reduce poverty rate in the country.

Economy of Nigeria

Nigeria on the Gulf of Guinea colonized by Great Britain witnessed a closed economy before the advent of the colonial masters. Agriculture was the main industry. The people of Nigeria practiced a great deal of subsistent farming. During the period of colonization the economy of Nigeria was reliant mostly on agricultural produce like cocoa, cotton, ground nuts and rubber for export. At the beginning of the 20th century, private British companies were interested in the exploration of the Nigerian oil resources. Unfortunately, the outbreak of the First World War marked the end of the region's petroleum ambitions for twenty years. The discovery of oil resources around 1956 was made in the present Bayelsa and Rivers States. The first oil well was found at Oleibiri and the first oil tanker left Nigeria on 17 February 1958.

After gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria made considerable efforts in its economic development, "being the leading agricultural power on the African continent. In 1971, the country joined the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). During the 1970s, Nigeria enjoyed an oil boom. In the oil boom era, Nigeria gained a lot of financial breakthroughs which led to economic development of the country then. According to Akpagu (2000: 98), "Nigeria is the ninth largest oil producer in the world". Nigeria's position has moved upward after oil exploration in the country has improved tremendously.

In spite of its purported grandiose economy, Nigeria is still what can be described as an economy on the verge of collapse. The causes of the near collapse state and unprecedented underdevelopment are not far-fetched.

The causes

Outside bad governance (mal-administration) which is a major cause of Nigeria's economic problems, the country's oil industry (the dominant industry) is led by engineers from (mainly European) well-industrialized countries. They are responsible for carrying out major oil exploration programmes in Nigeria. This can be seen in the case of Shell British Petroleum now (Shell), one of the European companies which acquired unique concessions, before independence as viewed by Gravin and Onyemakinde, (1980). This same Shell is still the major oil producing company in the country at the present time after over seventy years of oil exploration.

In Nigeria, 95% of the mass production of petroleum is done by the most important partnership companies of which Shell is the leading company and enjoys over 50 % of the total national production. A major French oil giant Elf is by the corner. Elf has combined with another French oil superpower Total to form the TOTALFINAELF partnership which has in some cases been embarking on Joint Ventures with Shell and NNPC in Nigeria. Most well paid oil workers in Elf Oil Company in Nigeria are French expatriates. Indigenous Oil workers are among the few workers in Nigeria who enjoy massive salaries. Foreign oil companies even pay more. They are paid in Dollars. With the exchange rate presently at (400

– 450) Nigerian Naira to an American Dollar, the foreign oil workers earn more than their Nigerian counterpart.

Certain key position in these foreign oil companies especially the French oil companies are exclusively reserved for the foreigners only. This is as a result of the Nigerians unable to speak French language and therefore there is no mutual trust for key and very sensitive positions to be handed over to Nigerians to handle. If more Nigerians are trained to be French literate and gain employment in the French oil companies such as Elf, Nigerians will therefore be receiving huge pay packages which in turn will contribute their own quota to the development of the nation.

French Language as a Catalyst for Development in Nigeria in the Era of Globalization

Let's take globalization first as a concept. This nomenclature does not only refer to the expansion of trade, but also refer to the international competition between economic and social systems. Bestman (2003:161) describes globalization as: "A dynamic capitalist concept that embraces all aspects of our economic, political, social and cultural life". The world is now a global village where people all over the world can just take a stroll to the village market to buy and sell, some times without the buyers and sellers meeting physically. Okeh (2003:6) notes that globalization is a social phenomenon that allows the world to become a small family. This reveals that globalization is international and transnational trade on a world scale, a consequence of the ever-increasing world of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in contemporary civilization.

Globalization subsumes internationalization. Internationalization would refer to exchanges of various phenomena, which are economic, political, cultural etc, between nations in relations that could be viable, reliable, acceptable and peaceful. Globalization is a suitable instrument for the industrialization of a country. It gets rid of the problems of lack of machinery, materials, instruments, technical personnel, lack of information of common markets and common money etc. The common market promotes efficiency through healthy competition and division of labour.

Through the globalized markets, it is easy to take advantage of the numerous and larger markets in the world. As part of this, there can be greater access to capital and technological resources. We can as well have technological transfer. This means that importation of products and resources is cheaper while the opportunities for exportation are expanded.

Through globalization, academic and scientific links between Nigeria and developed countries like France will be encouraged. Technological transfer will be easy to incorporate into the Nigerian system. Globalization promotes awareness by the entire regions of the world diversifying in their resources to ensure a better economy.

Nigeria is expected to fuel her international trade through communication. We cannot thrive well in this era of globalization without communication either verbal or non-verbal. Be it physical or virtual contacts, there must be communication. During the period lockdown because of Covid-19 Pandemic, Zoom Conferences became the order of the day as Covid-19 protocols demanded social distancing. If not for the Information and Communication Technology (ICT), communication would have been very difficult during the period of worldwide lockdown in the year 2020 where many people worked from home.

We have already seen the impact of globalization through the mobile phones and computers. Private network service providers such as MTN, Globacom and Airtel) can be seen all over Nigeria making huge profits. These private companies help to reduce the unemployment rate in our country. France has a great number of such service providers who can venture into business in the country with low tariffs. This would make the telecommunication market competition sterner and stiffer in turn forcing down the cut-throat tariffs in the country.

France has giant network service providers. One of such is 'Orange'. 'Orange' is a French telecommunication outfit which is established all over most of the francophone African countries. It has in many occasions sponsored football competitions in Africa including the African Nations Cup and the African Champions League. It thrives very well in Cameroun with relatively low tariffs. If such an outfit for instance comes to the country it will not only create employment opportunities but it will also drastically reduce the poverty rate. This can be done if more people in Nigeria engage in learning of French language and an enabling environment is created to woo French telecommunication investors to

the country. This will contribute to the development of the country's economy. There is a possibility of linking the francophone neighbours to Nigeria as some of these French telecommunication outfits and businesses already exist in the neighbouring francophone countries. This can boost the economy of this country. Economically, the move to link Nigeria to her neighbours in terms of telecommunication is of great advantage to development in Nigeria

Therefore, arising from the foregoing, in this era of globalization, it is expedient that Nigeria should have a good control of at least two international languages. Now that Nigerians already has English language as the official language of the country, the next line of thinking is to make French language Nigeria's second international language not just in words but in action to be able to communicate effectively with our neighbours and with others in the international community. This entails that we need to embrace French language in its entirety. Language is a means of identity. According to Itiveh and Omeke (2016), language is a God given identity of man. In the international level, Nigeria should outside English language use French language also as a means of identity to boost our economic power through association.

French speaking countries will be willing to do business with us if we communicate with them in their language. Madueke (2007) quoted by Obi and Agbagbatu (2010) says that "if we must develop our economy, we must build on a language with which our nation can communicate economically with other countries." It is not just to communicate but communicate effectively with it.

French and English are some of the major languages used in international organizations such as the International Olympic Committee, the Red Cross, World Trade Organisation, the United Nations, and her numerous Agencies; FIFA, OPEC, EU, etc. Nigeria is a member of the International Olympic Committee, the Red Cross and the United Nations and many other international organizations. With the French language, experts in different fields can express their thoughts, opinions, emotions and daily realities in international conferences.

Agriculture

In agriculture, the country faces a lot of problems which vary from lack of rudimentary tools to lack of advanced agricultural equipment especially those meant for mechanized farming to boost agricultural food production. There is lack of willing manpower to work in the agricultural sector (due to the rural-urban exodus) of teeming young people in search of white collar jobs. We also have the lack of basic capital for agricultural development. Very sadly, every year Nigeria budgets huge sums of money for agriculture but these sums in essence are too meager for such a large country with huge agricultural needs for the sustainability of its over bloated population. Sometimes these budgeted funds are either embezzled or misappropriated.

There is also the lack of storage facilities for agricultural produce leading to wastage especially for perishable goods. The absence of the means of transportation of agricultural produce to the few available markets is a big problem. This is more dangerous for perishable agricultural produce which cannot last for a long time. The rail and the road system in Nigeria is nothing to write home about. The roads are in a terrible condition so also is the rail transportation. Lack of foreign investment and technical support in the agricultural industry is a big problem.

However, if we have Nigerian agricultural officers who have knowledge of French language, they can be trained by the French on area of mechanized farming and technical support in which France is very versatile. France will be willing to finance viable agricultural projects especially in areas of building storage facilities in the country, if we show a high level of commitment in the study and associate with French language. This will enable France to do business with Nigeria in area of agricultural raw materials. For instance, France needs a lot of rubber for her pneumatic industries as France is a leading power house in the tyre manufacturing industry which uses rubber as its raw material. A good example of a French tyre company is Michelin. For the economic principle of proximity to raw material and a more consolidated Franco-Nigerian economic relation, France will be willing to site a branch of the giant tyre company in Nigeria. This will not only boost the economy but will also improve agricultural development and employment in the country.

Science and Medicine

France is a major centre for scientific research in Europe. France is also a dominant force in medical research. It is interesting to note that scientific documents show great scientists have come from France. France has had great physicists and mathematicians. The scientist Louis Pasteur, inventor of the rabies vaccine who later became the founder of microbiology and the Pasteur Institute, which is one of the world's renowned medical centres, and many other scientists to mention but a few who have contributed immensely to the development of science and medicine in time past and present are French.

It is worthy to note that the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) virus was first of all discovered by French doctors when they isolated HIV in 1983 as affirmed by Ganagana et al (2008). This means that France has a long line of documented medical and scientific history. In order to stop or reduce the scourge of diseases in the country, Nigerian medical doctors and medical related scientists alike need to study the French language for them to carry out research especially on new diseases and virus attacks such the Corona Virus (COVID-19) in this era of Corona Virus pandemic which has ravaged the whole world and is still on with new resistant strains of the COVID such as the Delta and the Omicron variants are emerging in the second wave of the pandemic.

Nigerian scientists and medical professionals should have a good control of French language as an act that will bring rapid development to fields of medicine and science in the country. The staff of the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) and the Presidential Task Force on Covid-19 in Nigeria should be French literate to be able to work with our francophone neighbours to curb diseases in the region. This is very necessary basically because of issue of immigration especially in the West African sub-region.

In addition, pharmacists in Nigeria could have easy access to research in pharmacy and would also be able to acquire pharmaceutical products easily from France if Nigeria pharmacists are committed to be French literate. By learning French language, pharmacist will be able to dispense qualitative medicine in areas of pediatrics, gynecology, orthopedics, virology and other related medical fields. If this is done effectively, high life expectancy will be achieved. If the well-being of the citizens of the country is guaranteed, it will contribute immensely to the development of the country Nigeria as the saying goes "health is wealth".

Manufacturing and Technology

France is one of the largest producers of military space crafts, airplanes, helicopters and automobiles in the world. Renault and Peugeot are some of France's leading car manufacturing companies. That means that France is one of the world's decision-makers in the automobile industries. It is quite obvious that the car producer Peugeot is well known in Nigeria. The brand has been in Nigeria for decades. Nigeria has the Peugeot Assembly Plant in Kaduna, and it has been a huge source of employment especially in the eighties. Most prominent politicians had Peugeot products as their official cars until government policies on government official vehicles relegated Peugeot to the background.

The fact that Nigeria is interested in the French automobile industry implies that it has to learn how to handle the new automobile digital technologies especially in this era of digital competition. France is ready to offer that expertise to Nigerians with relative ease if our automobile engineers are trained to have a good command of French language. That expertise will go a long way to help establish new car manufacturing firms or help existing ones in the country grow knowing fully well that Nigeria is a huge market destination for sales of automobiles in Africa.

Outside this Peugeot Assembly Plant in Kaduna, there is no other foreign car assembly Plant in Nigeria. There has been the presence of indigenous motor manufacturing companies in Nigeria recently. We have INNOSON Motors (INNOSON NIG LTD) and the Anambra Motor Company (ANAMCO) owned by Nigerians in the eastern part of the country which definitely do not produce enough capacity to serve the gluttonous Nigerian need for automobiles. Their expansion in high magnitude or creation of more motor manufacturing firms will create more jobs in addition to the existing ones thereby contributing to the economic development of the country.

Tourism

Over the years, tourism has proven to be one of the major foreign currency earners for developed and developing countries. Nigeria is undoubtedly endowed with enormous tourism potentials. Several parts of

Nigeria are blessed with historical sites and tourist attractions. The north of the country is dominated by savannah while the south is characterized by dense forests. Each zone offers tourist attractions. For example the Wildlife Park (Jos Wildlife) in Jos, Plateau State and the Yankari Game Reserve in Bauchi, Bauchi State. These are the largest parks with an area of over 900km². The parks contain all kinds of African animals including monkeys, zebras, Egyptian cobras and African pythons etc.

There are also other tourist attractions such as Obudu Cattle Ranch in Obudu, Cross River State. It has a mild climate which suits the climatic needs of visitors from temperate regions of the world. In Niger State, there is the Kainji Dam, the Kainji (Artificial) Lake and the Kainji Game Reserve which opened in 1969. It is famous for its wildlife collections. In Delta State, there is the Holy Bible Site at Araya, a small town near Aviara about 65km South East of Warri. In this site, there is built a monument where it is believed that a huge Holy Bible several times bigger than the normal size of the Holy Bible fell from Heaven. This holy ground has since been a source of healing for all sorts of infirmities to those who believe. Truly, there are so many other tourist destinations in the country.

Unfortunately, of all these great tourist attraction destinations in the country, Nigeria is a tourist destination for few francophone tourists. This definitely points at the linguistic barrier to francophone tourists. Tourist activities would have created more employment for young Nigerians if is well harnessed. If we speak and write inscriptions in French language in tourist centres and we have tour guides who speak French it will motivate French tourists to visit Nigeria.

The member countries of the European Economic Community (EEC) would be interested in investing in Nigeria for the reason being that the French language, in addition to English language is spoken in Nigeria. That would be an important advantage to the tourist industry. Foreign investment in tourism would help to eradicate the massive unemployment especially now that unemployment statistics has reached an all-time high where Nigeria in recent times during the first phase of the Covid-19 Pandemic has made so many businesses to fold up doubling the rate of unemployment in the country.

Unemployment and Poverty in Nigeria

Since the eighties and nineties, there have been several structural adjustment programmes in Nigeria. The aim of these structural adjustment programmes is to reduce to its barest minimum unnecessary expenditure and through this reduction in spending generate economic growth that is more widely distributed and sustainable. Unfortunately, the ambitious programmes that have been launched to address this problem have not always yielded the expected results. Unemployment and poverty rates are still very high. For lack of a solution being proffered to the problem, young people are trying their luck abroad to work. A large number of younger people are leaving Nigeria or are at least interested in leaving the country for abroad for greener pasture. The brain drain situation in the country is very high. Nigeria's best hands have virtually traveled overseas in search of lucrative jobs. While unemployment is driving young people out of the country, poverty characterized by malnutrition, lack of medical care, lack of education and training, and lack of access to financial resources to kick start businesses is further plunging the country into deep misery, dejection and hopelessness.

Anyanwu (2005:4), analyzing rural poverty in Nigeria through the 1996 National Consumer Survey, reveals with the results which show that in 1996, the percentage of the population living below the poverty line was 71.7%, an increase from the 46% it was in 1992. The acuity of poverty in Nigeria was 33%, of which 18.9% was considered "severe" in the same year. The Encyclopedia Britannica quoted by the Jehovah Witnesses periodical Awake! (2005), indicates that Nigeria is one of the eighteen poorest countries in the world. In recent times, the poverty rate has tremendously increased which has made Nigeria to be referred to by the members of the international community as the "poverty capital of the world". This was a huge damage to the country's image and reputation between 2019 and 2020. On top of all these anomalies, inflation has risen to an astronomical height further compounding the poverty problem.

To get out of this doldrums, Nigeria needs to pick up its bits. The country needs to start building massively industries. Massive infrastructural development is also a priority. On the other hand, Nigeria needs to woo foreign investors to come and establish their businesses in the country as she has huge marketability index because of her ever escalating population figures. One of such foreign countries to be

wooded is France. France has been more comfortable doing business with Nigeria because a number of her businesses already exist nearby in the francophone countries surrounding Nigeria, therefore, in some cases it looks like an expansion of their business already existing nearby. At a time according to Owoeye (2010), there were about a hundred French business outfits in Nigeria. These enterprises include: CFAO, SCOA, BNP, EIFFEL, BROS, LAFARGE, SGE, ETPM, TECHNIP, DELATTRE-BEZONS, CGG, Total, Elf, Michelin, Dumez which built the famous Niger Bridge still in existence today; connecting the East to the West of this country. Unfortunately, most of these companies have left Nigeria.

Wooing a country which has or already has a linguistic affinity with yours to do business with your country is quite easier than wooing a country with no linguistic affinity with yours because of the linguistic barrier. Over the years French language has gradually crept into the country, it is not a stranger in Nigeria. Wooing therefore France to do more business in the country will be great advantage because there is already in existence the Franco-Nigerian linguistic and economic cooperation over the years.

The Franco-Nigerian Linguistic and Economic Cooperation

The French language journey recommenced when the then Military Head of State of Nigeria, General Sani Abacha made a policy statement in a public broadcast on 14th December and on the 31st December 1996 with the following words according to Onyemelukwe (2004:20) who quoted Ade-Ojo...

‘we have seen that we are virtually surrounded by French -speaking countries. And these French-speaking countries are our kith and kin. But, because of the difference inherited in the languages of our colonial masters, there has been a vacuum in communication with our neighbours. It is in our interest to learn French’.

After the pronouncement of this very all important statement about learning of French language in Nigeria, a new era began. This brought about the establishment of a Presidential Task Force to formulate and implement new policies on the teaching and learning of French language in all schools in Nigeria. The collective effort geared towards promoting the French language in Nigeria would further help to go a long way in the development of the country in the sense that the Franco-Nigerian linguistic cooperation waxed stronger. The interest to learn the language became high in schools of the federation at that time. French companies were doing extremely well and there were more French companies in Nigeria than any other time in the country. Companies like Peugeot, Elf, Total, Dumez and many other companies employed many workers on the country. During that period, many French centres of learning, like the Alliance Française centres, Centres for French Teaching and Documentation were established. The French Language Village Badagry, Lagos was also created during that period. The French embassy was very proactive in anything that concerns French in the country. Scholarships were awarded by the French Government to Nigerian students to study in France. In the new policy on Education NPE (2004:10), it was written that:

“For smooth interaction with our neighbours, it is desirable for every Nigeria to speak French. Accordingly, French shall be the second official language in Nigeria and it shall be compulsory in primary and junior secondary schools but non-vocational elective in the senior secondary school”.

All these contributed to the driving force of the Franco-Nigerian linguistic and economic cooperation which saw a turnaround for good in the Franco-Nigerian partnership which spanned some decades.

However, all these fell off when the Franco-Nigerian linguistic and economic cooperation grounded to a halt due to lack of commitment to the partnership, change of successive governments and policies. Nigeria started shifting alliance to China and Japan. This has brought more Japanese and Chinese companies and investments to Nigeria at the expense of the French companies which have helped to build our economy before the arrival of these oriental brothers. We now hear more of Chinese loans to Nigeria rather than from Paris Club.

CONCLUSION

The role of French language in the development of Nigeria both at the social and economic spheres cannot be over emphasized. For sustainable socio-economic development to take place, there is need for collective effort from all the people of that country. Outside that, there is need to tap from available resources which can come from elsewhere especially in this era of globalization and given that Nigeria is surrounded by French speaking countries we definitely need to study French language. To maximize the socio-economic potential and for sub-regional integration, Nigeria must build its linguistic capacity to a very robust level in all sectors in order to bring about development by attracting foreign investors, professionals and scholars within the African Continent and from other continents such as Asia whom through India, Japan and China have been having a lot of businesses; Europe and America who have the largest investments established in Nigeria and Australia. The Franco-Nigerian linguistic and economic cooperation which has contributed immensely to the development of the country socio-economically should be reawakened energized by the Federal Government of Nigeria from its temporary slumber and the goals of that laudable cooperation be vigorously pursued to contribute its quota to the development of the country. This will not only bring about massive employment, it will also drastically reduce the rate of poverty in the country.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are made based on the conclusions of the paper.

- (i) The stake holders in the language industry and decision makers must put all hands on deck to fashion out ways and means through which the nation can benefit from the huge advantage French language offers in the path of development of the country.
- (ii) The Nigerian government should put more effort to woo into the country more foreign investors especially those from France as part of the policy of making French language a second foreign language in the country.
- (iii) Nigeria professionals in all fields and disciplines, both present and upcoming should be trained to have a good command of French language to be able to do research in their various disciplines and to meet up with the linguistic challenges of globalization.
- (iv) The Franco-Nigerian linguistic and economic cooperation which has contributed immensely to the development of the country socio-economically should be reawakened from its temporary slumber and the goals of that laudable cooperation be vigorously pursued to contribute its quota.

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