French Language and Anglophone Students: Making a Case for Second Foreign Language Acquisition

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Abstract

The acquisition of French as a second foreign language by anglophone African students, especially Nigerians, has become a necessity, not only because the world is now a global village, but more for the fact that the country is surrounded by francophone countries. French is acknowledged as an important language which does not only enjoy exemplary international reputation, recognition and attention but is also distinguished by a proud and robust history. Based on the vital and decisive roles that French has played and continues to play in political and economic circles internationally, it is expedient for the youths of Africa to avail themselves of the opportunity the language offers them. This paper looks at the importance of French language to anglophone African students, and therefore, makes a case for the students in higher institutions of learning, to be encouraged to master the language.

Introduction

French is the mother tongue as well as the first and national language of a few countries and the official (de jure/de facto) language of all former French colonies in Africa. It is the official language of Republic of Benin, very close to Nigeria in the West, second official language of Cameroon in the East, official language of Niger in the North and official language of Republic of Chad. in the North–East. Apart from the aforementioned countries, French is the official language of Togo, Côte-d’Ivoire, Senegal, Belgium, second official language of Canada, and the official language of France. All the countries that were once former colonies of France are multilingual, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural. With the geographical proximity of Nigeria to some of these French-speaking countries in Africa, it is of utmost importance that its youths learn and speak French for various reasons.

Objectives of this Research

The objective of this paper is to highlight the inherent potentials in the acquisition of the French language and to let anglophone students recognise that the ability to speak French increases their chances of working in the diplomatic community. According to Isa Mohammed – Nigeria’s Ambassador to Côte-d’Ivoire, “to work in Foreign Service, a second foreign language is required.” This statement was made during one of the visit of Redeemer’s University’s students on guided visit to the country. He maintained that the second language could be French, Arabic or Spanish, but emphasised French as most important in dealing with neighbouring countries of Nigeria. Ambassador Isa
Mohammed confirmed that some of his colleagues became Ambassadors because of their proficiency in both English and French. Therefore, proficiency in two international languages will enhance the chances of getting some global jobs.

According to Ade-Ojo (2012:15), “proficiency in French opens advantageous windows of job opportunities to each Anglophone African who possesses such asset.” Some of the reputable jobs opened to graduates of the language, apart from working in the hospitality sector, includes, working in transnational, multinational organisations.

There are other opportunities such as becoming the Personal Assistants to Chief Executives of international organizations, Attachés or Personal Assistants to Ambassadors in French speaking countries, representative at trans-regional agencies like ECOWAS and African Union (AU), and French lecturers in universities, research institutes and other institutions of higher learning. The list of opportunity includes working at United Nations (UN) and other international Non-governmental agencies around the world. With the acquisition of French language, Nigerian students can become writers, translators and interpreters who are mostly sought after. Interpretation and translation from English to French or vice-versa can be financially rewarding. The ability to speak French and comprehend it can make migration easier, and they can easily engage in legitimate businesses of their choice with French speaking partners without language barriers.

The Importance of French Language to Anglophone Students

Apart from from the constitutional status of French as the official or preferred language of the seven countries namely, Canada, Cameroon, Mauritius, Saint Lucia, Vanuatu, Dominican and Seychelles Islands, French has for centuries, served as a key working language of international organizations. It is either the only working language or one of the languages accorded the special privilege of serving as the medium of communication for transactions, discussions as well as political and economic decisions.

Nimako (2014), argues that, “French language as at today is the most dominant international language in West Africa on country by country basis. Eight out of the fifteen ECOWAS countries officially speak French. This means mathematically, 53% of the West African countries officially speak French” (32). If eight out of the fifteen member-states of the Communauté Economique des États de l’Afrique de l’Ouest (CEDEAO) alternatively known in English as Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) are speaking the language, means that it will convey advantage on new speakers. French is either the official language or the preferred language of communication of thirty-one out of the fifty-four countries in Africa.

According to Nimako, as of 2014, Africa accounted for 96 million of French speakers (2014:22). On the basis of its users across the globe, French as the fifth intercontinental language, accounts for it being the preferred language of
communication and commerce in many countries. In this regard, it is appropriate to state that some African countries without colonial linkage with France opted for the adoption of French as second official language at one stage in their development. Some cases in point are Nigeria, Equatorial Guinea (a former Spanish colony), Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau, Sao Tomé and Príncipe (all former Portuguese colonies) and Ghana. In the case of Nigeria, Late General Sani Abacha (Nigerian military dictator 1993-1998), through an executive order, made a pronouncement in favour of the adoption of French as additional official language for the country between 14th and 31st December 1996 (Amuwo, 2001: online). For Ghana, Nimako (2014), posits,

Ghana’s Ministry of Education in collaboration with the French Embassy in Accra has been making vigorous attempts since the 1980s to promote French language learning in Ghana. A great deal of attention had been paid to the training of French teachers in Ghana who would in turn teach future French language students. In this regard, three Colleges of Education (formerly Teacher Training College) in the Eastern, Ashanti and the Northern regions were designated as centres of French teaching and learning. These were the Mount Mary College of Education (Somanya, Eastern), Wesley College of Education (Kumasi, Ashanti) and Bagabaga College of Education (Bagabaga, Northern). Ten Regional Centres of Learning were also established to provide teaching and learning materials for French teachers and students. The centres were also responsible for monitoring and promoting the French language in Ghana. At the higher level, the French Embassy also supports students pursuing French language education and even sometimes sponsors some for overseas schooling (44).

The efforts of the government of Ghana to position French language to an official level got a major boost in 2018, through an announcement made by the president. Asiedu (2019), states that, at La Francophonie Summit 2018, Ghana’s President Nana Akufo-Addo, “announced plans to make French a compulsory subject for high school students” (online).

At the international organizations front, French is both a working and official language of the United Nations, European Union, UNESCO, NATO, International Olympic Committee, International Red Cross Society, International Criminal Court, African Union, etc. Proficiency in French is essential for anyone considering a career in any international organisation. France is the World’s top tourist destination that attracts “nearly 90 million tourists” in year 2018 alone.

The ability to speak even a little French such as: Bonjour (Good morning), Comment allez-vous? (How are you), Bien merci et vous? (Fine and you), Très bien, merci (Very well, thank you), and information on the popular tourists sites
associated with the country, raises in many people the desire to visit Paris and all the regions of the Côte d’Azur to the snow-capped peaks of the Alps.

It is necessary to state that learning a second language as an adult presents its own challenges, but the ends result makes the exercise worthwhile. According to Nimako (2014):

> It should be noted however that in all cases a learner of a first language has no idea of a previous language but a learner of a second language has. Having the idea of a first language has both advantage and disadvantage for learning a second language. The advantage from the knowledge of the first language in learning the second language is called positive transfer. The disadvantage aspect is called negative transfer or interference (40).

It should be noted that although the French language is touted as the language of diplomacy, it is nevertheless very complex, full of twists and turns in terms of its grammatical structure (41). Once these are mastered, comprehension and speaking become easier. French is not a difficult language to learn. Although it is a language that requires a certain precision, it is also capable of expressing great subtlety. It does not take long before one reaches a level of communication in French.

There are many methods on the Internet that make learning French enjoyable. French also appeals to students in view of its melodious sound. According to the ‘Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie’ (OIF) 274 million French speakers exist in the world. This fact emanated from a 2014 report, which discussed French’s progress since 2010. France is in the top ten preferred destination for foreign education. After the United States and the United Kingdom, that are top two countries with international students, Canada where French is widely spoken with English, according to Canada Bureau of International Education (2017: online) is in third position with 494,525 and France in 6th position with 343,386, based on information by The Pie News (2018: online).

Promotion of linguistic diversity by speaking French is a major contribution to preserving linguistic diversity in the world and by so doing, the exclusive domination of a single language. Having discussed extensively on the status of French and copious reasons why it should be spoken, it should be clear to Anglophone students that there is a lot of opportunities awaiting them as it is a career asset. This means that the ability to speak French will enable them to find jobs in many multinational companies using French as their working language in a wide range of sectors (retailing, automotive, luxury goods and aeronautics). France as the World’s 5th largest economy attracts entrepreneurs, researchers and the cream of foreign students.

It is easy for Anglophone students to make contacts with French speakers of their own age through different social media platforms to engage in face-to-face video interaction with them in order to practice and polish their spoken French. There are also many foreign exchange programmes for
different age groups in France as well, to enhance students’ knowledge of the language. According to a report on EF (n.d) website:

A student exchange program in France will teach you many cultural lessons. France is a country with a long, proud history. It holds a unique place in our collective imagination. Imagine going beyond tourism to get to know the real France. A foreign exchange program in France is one of the best ways to enhance in-class language learning. It will also give you many ways to become a part of the culture and society as you improve your French language skills (online).

Thousands of French schools are entwined with counterparts around the world’s largest educational network. According to Ade-Ojo (2012):

With English enjoying the right of being the official language of each Anglophone African country and the medium of instruction in each of its educational institutions, the knowledge of French, the second most important human language of world-wide communication as an additional language by Anglophone Africans, will empower them to respond more positively and confidently to the realization of their affective goals. Proficiency in French will also help them beneficially harness the blessings of multilingualism in English and French, which are indisputably, the most patronized world languages. Ade-Ojo (16).

Since English and French rule the world in the area of communication, Anglophone students upon completion of their academic programmes, in the University, that is, those who are proficient in both languages can choose to be translators and can work with their various governments as interpreters especially during important international meetings.

It is pertinent to mention that many highly placed Anglophone Africans in politics, business, academics as well as those on diplomatic and professional assignments have been embarrassed, psychologically traumatized in different Francophone countries in which communication and interpersonal relations are compulsorily conducted in French. The experience of Professor Oyewale Tomori - first Vice-Chancellor of Redeemer’s University – serves as an example in this case. As a way to encourage French as a course of study in the university, he gave an account of his inability to place an order for the meal he wanted in a French restaurant. He ended up not being able to eat what he was given because he could not speak French.

Nigeria and Ghana are typical examples of Anglophone countries in Africa where many highly qualified professionals and experts have been disappointingly edged out of top-ranking positions in sub-regional, continental and international regulatory bodies because they are not proficient in French language. Anglophone students
should take the bull by the horns by being proficient in French in order to occupy the rightful positions meant for them in future in international organisations.

At present, it is beneficial to Anglophone Students to study and learn French to a higher level by acquiring Master’s and Doctorate degrees in the language in order to become classroom teacher and lecturers in high schools and universities. French language lecturers are not enough in universities in Nigeria and it is now enviable and lucrative to be a Professor of French unlike in the past when professors were not well remunerated.

Conclusion

Considering the enormous benefits embedded in the knowledge and proficiency in French, each Anglophone country especially Nigeria (because of its population), should as a matter of urgency put in place a pro-French policy that will encourage the young ones to be interested in the language. Such policies may include giving scholarships to students who want to study French in the university. It will be in the interest of individual Anglophone students that the status of French be raised in each country’s academic curriculum such as making it compulsory in their secondary school curriculum.

Anglophone students should not take the learning of French with levity as it can guarantee their survival in future. French language Immersion Programmes should be organised every year in French speaking countries in order to expose students to the Francophone ambiance. This has been the case in Redeemer’s University, Nigeria, whose recent Immersion programme took place in University of Abidjan, Cote d’Ivoire. The impact programme was so enriching to the extent that the students started expressing themselves proficiently in French at the end of two weeks. They had the opportunity of being taught in class by French lecturers. They also went to the market to buy things and they made friends among the Ivoirians through the language club programmes organised on Saturdays.

References:


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