

Exploring French Language Studies for an Effective Conflict Resolution between Nigeria and her Francophone Neighbours

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Abstract

Language particularly the human language has remained the chief means of communication within the various human enclaves. It is therefore an indispensable tool that has been explored in various ways by man in order to meet his needs, attain his goals and aspirations as well resolve his conflicts. However, because human languages vary from one social enclave to another, language barrier remains a major factor that has hampered effective relations between individuals, communities and nation states. Hence, the need for language studies cannot be overemphasised. This study therefore seeks to examine ways of exploring language studies particularly French language for more enhanced relations and effective conflict resolutions between Nigeria and her francophone neighbours considering her geopolitical location. Thus, this paper is explored from the pragmatics perspective to the study of language in order to properly examine the subject. The inferential model of the linguistic communication study is specifically adopted. Suggested ways of exploring French Languages studies for an effective conflict resolution between Nigeria and her francophone neighbours include the reviewing of the Nigerian Education Policy on Language Studies by making French language a mandatory subject at all levels in all formal institutions of learning and formation. The restructuring of the French language studies curriculum at various levels to include topics such as the use of language skills in critical thinking, cross-cultural communication and conflict resolution. This way Nigeria and her francophone neighbours will have an enhanced relations devoid of suspicion, thus will be able to resolve conflicts more effectively without any language barrier.

Key words: Communication, Conflict, Conflicts Resolution, Francophone Neighbours, French Language, Language Studies

Introduction

Language is a unique trait endowed on humans chiefly for communication purpose. In every human society or coexistence, language is a vital tool explored to meet various human needs, interests, and aspirations; as well as resolve issues. Thus, the need for language acquisition among humans cannot be overruled. This paper therefore seeks ways of exploring language studies particularly the French language for effective conflict resolution between Nigeria and her francophone neighbours. Conflict is inevitable in every human sphere as each individual, group, community or nation has a unique perception, opinions pattern or even interest. Hence, there is bound to be disagreement or clashes from time to time. However, how this is resolved is what is of utmost importance. Conflict in itself is not bad or evil as conceived by some for it exposes areas of differences, as

well creates room for reaction and counter reaction over issues of disagreement, thus giving opportunity for understanding and better resolution of differences. On the other hand, if conflict is not well handled, it could result to a lot of mayhems that could be devastating. The process of conflict resolution demands varied strategies of which communication is the principal means by which they are achieved. In fact, communication particularly using human language cannot be ruled out in any conflict resolution. This is why most nation-states encourage bilingualism and multilingualism by way making and effectively implementing language studies policies.

However, in Nigeria, over the years, the government has been inconsistent in her language education policies particularly as regards French irrespective of her geopolitical location. This has adversely affected the effective promotion of the



country's national interest particularly within the West African sub-region. It has particularly hampered her relations with her francophone neighbours. In most cases of conflicts between her and her French neighbours, Nigeria has not been able to effectively communicate her intentions hence has not properly protected her interest (Offor 62-67). In fact, French language is often times limited to classroom practice due to the lip-service status given to it. In Nigeria, French language studies has not been adequately explored for use in solving real life challenges especially in the case of resolving international disagreements; due to various reasons ranging from inconsistency in policies making and implementation to lack of teachers' training as well as instructional materials. It is thus this aforementioned reasons that necessitated the writing of this paper.

To properly explore the subject of this paper, the theory of inferential Model of linguistics communication is adopted. The key concepts of this paper are explained from varying viewpoints. A background study is done on the Nigeria and her francophone neighbours. The status of French language studying in Nigeria is also briefly reviewed. Consequently, the importance of exploring French language studies is pointed out. Finally, ways in which French language studies could be explored for effective conflict resolution between Nigeria and her francophone neighbours are outlined.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is generally anchored on the communication theory which is often hypothesised from different angles in various fields. However, in this work, the theory of communication is specifically explored from the linguistic perspective. The Inferential Model of the Linguistics Communication Theory is particularly used to buttress the practical use of language in communication with specific reference to conflict resolution. According to Akmajian, Demers, Farmer, and Harnish, "The Inferential Model of communication proposes that in the course of learning to speak our language we also learn how to communicate in the language, and learning this involves acquiring

a variety of shared beliefs or presumptions as well as system of inferential strategies" (373). It is only through this process of language acquisition that a learner can be able to effectively communicate his or her intentions (Akmajian et al 372). The inferential model of communication therefore strongly advocates that language studies be geared toward the understanding of the structure of a language as well its use in real life context. This is because the human language as rightly observed by Spencer-Oatey and Zegarac , "relies heavily on people's capacity to engage in reasoning about each other's intentions, exploiting not only evidence presented by signals in language code, but also evidence from other sources, including the perception and general world knowledge" (71). Therefore, it is apparently very important that language studies be done in cognisance of the social cultural context of such language for its acquisition to be useful and effective in communication.

French language studies in Nigeria have not been done putting into consideration the above mentioned ideology on language acquisition. The Nigerian government and the various stakeholders concerned should therefore encourage a pragmatic approach to French language acquisition. This way, Nigeria will be able to produce citizens particularly professionals who are not only fluent in French language but are also able to effectively communicate in this language bearing in mind that communication goes beyond fluency. This will in turn boost Nigeria's relations with the international francophone communities particularly her francophone neighbours as her citizens especially those who man her in foreign relations, defence, economic and other governmental institutions are linguistically skilled enough in French to communicate her intentions and interest to them; thus, eliminating suspicion and misunderstandings of intentions enhanced by language barrier which breeds conflicts. French language teaching and learning in Nigeria should be done putting into cognisance its practical use in solving real life challenges such as conflicts. The communicative approach to teaching and



learning of language should be strongly encouraged in French language studies as it facilitates contextual language learning and use; thus enhancing proficiency.

Definition of key concepts

Communication

Communication is the act of expressing or conveying ideas, information or orders using verbal or non-verbal means. Communication is said to be effective if the intention of the speaker is adequately deciphered by the hearer. According to Croft, "Communication encompasses a great deal of human (and animal) activity. Reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing images, and creating images are all acts of communication" (1). For Akmajian et al, "communication is a social affair, usually taking place within the context of a fairly well defined social situation" (365). Generally, in the human society, the natural languages are often the chief means of communication. Thus, language use must be done taking into cognisance its socio-cultural context. What then is language itself?

Language

The concept of language particularly the natural language is multi-disciplinary. Thus the concept of Language has been defined from various perspectives such as the social, linguistics, psychological, and scientific viewpoints. However, one universal trait of the natural language is acknowledged in all this discipline; which is its peculiarity to humans. Affirming this fact, Pinker maintains that "in any natural history of the human species, language would stand out as the preeminent trait" (16). He further asserts that "Language is so tightly woven into human experiences that is scarcely possible to imagine life without it" (17). Hall, therefore defined language as an "institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory arbitrary symbols (158). In the same vein, Finegan described language as "a vehicle of thought, a system of expression that mediates the transfer of thought from one person to another" (16). He also referred to "the capacity to use language appropriately" as communication competence (Finegan 10). Language could be

defined thus as the linguistic code that is peculiar to a social group which is used for communicating thought, intentions, ideas and information. The need therefore for language acquisition cannot be ruled out in any human community.

Language Studies

Language Studies is an interdisciplinary course which its main goal is to equip learners with competence in a foreign language by way of exposing them to the structure and use in of such a given language. A language study gives learners the opportunity of understanding the structure and use of a language. It is basically aimed at language acquisition for use in real life context or situation. Thus, language studies create room for acquiring a language in cognisance to its socio-cultural context. It also affords one the opportunity of being bilingual or even multilingual. In as much as language remains the chief means of human communication, it studies is inevitable if any individual or group wants to keep abreast or relate with others.

Conflict:

Conflict is a universal phenomenon which is inevitable in every human relations. This is because most individual, groups or nation-states relating often have varied interests, ideologies or perception which determine their actions or counter-actions in a given situation. Thus Galtung referred to conflict as disagreements resulting from *contradiction* and *incompatibility* (24). According to Rahim "conflict is an interactive process manifested in the incompatibility, disagreement or dissonance with or between social entities" (198). Nicholson described conflict "as an escalation of a disagreement, which is its common prerequisite and is characterized by the existence of conflict behaviour, in which the beings are actively trying to damage one another" (16). For Pia and Diez, "conflict is a struggle or contest between people with opposing needs, ideas, beliefs, values, or goals" often resulting from incompatibility (2).

Conflict could have a positive or negative consequence depending on how it is handled. It is also obtainable at various levels of human existence and coexistence. Thus, conflict could



be intra-personal or interpersonal, inter-group, inter-state, inter-region or global. Types of conflict include: substantive/content conflict (disagreement on an issue or situation), personal conflict/relational conflict (personality incompatibility) and process conflict (disagreement on approach). By nature, it tends towards polarization. Having elaborated on the concept of conflict, Conflict resolution is apparently the next term to view.

Conflict resolution

Conflict resolution is an act that is as old as man's existence, for in order to live peacefully, humans often seek means of resolving their differences. However, Conflict resolution as a defined field of study started between the 1950s and 1960s at the height of the cold war when world powers with nuclear weapons threaten each other and even the world's survival (Ramsbotham et al 4). In this view, Ramsbotham et al described conflict resolution as a field of modern study that "defined itself in relation to the challenge of understanding and transforming destructive human conflicts" (Ramsbotham et al 8). For Nicholson, conflict resolution is when the inconsistency between wishes and actions of parties is resolved (11). Conflict resolution thus involves a conscience effort by conflicting parties to reach a neutral point. It involves a lot of strategies of which communication is the chief medium through which these strategies are carried including the act of mediating, persuading, negotiating and coordinating. Having explained the key concepts, a background study of Nigeria and her francophone neighbours relations is the next thing to reviewed

Nigeria and Her Francophone Neighbours: A Background Study

The term "francophone" is used to refer to places or countries where French is spoken as a maternal language, official language or language of communication. In Africa, most of the francophone countries speak French as an official language because they were colonized by France. Even after independence France has continue to wield great influence in her former colonies. Hence, France sees Nigeria as great threat to her relationship with her former colonies considering

Nigeria's huge human and natural resources as well as her hegemonic influence in the West Africa sub-region (Nzuanke45). In order to continue exerting influence in her former colonies, France has always explored her language diplomacy strategy to the disadvantage of Nigeria.

Nigeria is an Anglophone (English speaking) country bordered in the north by Niger, north-east by Chad, to east by Cameroun, to the south by the Gulf of Guinea (Atlantic Ocean) and to the south-west by Benin. Considering the geographical location of Nigeria, it is in her interest to encourage French language acquisition among her citizens so as to effectively propagate her national interest within the international neighbourhood. In view of the above, Adetula asserts that, "Geography plays a crucial role in defining the behaviour of states in the international system" (7).

The Nigerian foreign policy to towards her neighbours is anchored on the principle of "the promotion of stability and friendliness in neighbouring countries" (Alkali 183). Considering this, Nigeria has always maintained a position of peaceful resolution in the settlement of her conflicts with her neighbours. However, the actualisation of this principle is often hampered by language barrier particularly in French language. Thus, with rising contemporary issues such as insurgency and terrorism; as well as persistence increase in previously existing issues like inter-communal clashes between bordering international communities and cross-border crimes (oil theft, robbery and smuggling), there is therefore an urgent need for Nigeria to step-up workable strategies to overcome her language barriers in order to effectively handle these issues (International Crisis Group and Paix-Travail-Patrie « Nigeria, notre voisin, notre partenaire » 2). Nigeria needs to create avenues for equipping her citizens with French language skills. This way, she can effectively explore the language diplomacy to her advantage like France particularly in the case of conflict resolution.

Brief Review of the Status of French Language Studies in Nigeria

Considering the geopolitical sphere of the



Nigerian State as discussed above, the need for the acquisition of French language became a necessity. However, the French language studies was officially integrated into the Nigerian Education Curriculum after independence. Prior to the pre-independence years, French language studies was not officially integrated into the Nigerian Education Curriculum due to the “subtle competition between English and French colonial superpowers regarding whose language will emerge as the world’s first language” (Onyemelukwe: The French language and literary creativity 6).

Nonetheless, over the years, the Nigerian Government has remained inconsistent in her language policy on French Studies. Of all the editions of National Policy on Education (NPE), the 3rd edition published in 1998 has been the most favourable policy on French Language Studies stated thus:

For smooth interaction with our neighbours, 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. (FRN, 1998:9)

Though the degree of the implementation of the above stated policy cannot be ascertained, yet it remains the most assertive policy on French language Studies in recent times. In fact the assertion in this policy is owed to an earlier declaration made by the then Head of State General Sani Abacha having perceived the need for the study of French language (Onyemelukwe: The French language and literary creativity 48-49).

From the fourth - sixth editions of the NPE, French language as stated is only a core subject at the primary and junior secondary school levels. At the senior secondary level, is a non-vocation elective subject? (FRN 2004, 2008 & 2013). Suffice to say that despite the National University Commission (NUC) making French a General Studies Course (NUC 17), the scope of French language studies is still limited to that of a course of study in some universities and most tertiary institutions; while in the innovation

enterprise institutions and formation schools French language studies is excluded from their curriculum. In fact, French language teaching and learning in Nigeria is generally limited to classroom practice. The content and scope of French language is not designed to enable learners use French to solve real life challenges. Yet, one of the beliefs on which the Nigeria Education philosophy anchored is that “education is to be qualitative, comprehensive, functional and relevant to the needs of the society” (FRN 2013: 1). A good one I must say; but is the Nigerian government actually putting forth the right steps toward the realization of this belief. This is the problem this paper seeks to explore. Also, the overall philosophy of the nation as stated in the 2013 edition NPE includes: “promotion of Inter-African solidarity and world peace through understanding” (FRN 2013: 1). One wonder then how an understanding could be reached if there is no effective means of communication.

Putting the afore stated belief into cognisance, the Nigerian government needs to come forth with more assertive policies that will gear hers citizens towards the effective acquisition of French language skills that will be relevant to the needs of the nation particularly in the resolution of conflict between her and her francophone neighbours.

Importance of French Language Studies in Promotion of Peace and Conflict Resolution between Nigeria and Her Francophone Neighbour.

Language has always been, despite advancement in technologies, the most effective communication medium through which strategies of conflict resolution are explored. According to Offor, the ability of one to speak the language of the opponent in any negotiation is of great advantage (29). Thus, the importance of acquiring French language skill cannot be underestimated if Nigeria wants to effectively actualise her foreign policy objective of peaceful conflict resolutions between her and her francophone neighbours as stated thus in her 1999 constitution section 19, sub-section e: “Respect for international law and treaty



obligation as well as the seeking of settlement of international disputes by negotiation, mediation conciliatory arbitration and adjudication” (Alkali 184).

Highlighting the importance of French language studies in Nigeria in the enhancement of global peace and security particularly among her francophone neighbours Akinterinwa stressed that:

the understanding of French, especially by public servants in Nigeria, is a desideratum, because of relationships with the immediate neighbours and because of ECOWAS region, where Nigeria is a regional influential, and also because French is a language of imperium and self-reliance (www.thisdaylive.com).

French language studies provides the avenue for equipping Nigerians with the linguistic competence as well as skills needed in effective communication particularly in conflict situation thus affording them useful service to the nation particularly during conflicts. This way, the nation’s interest and intentions are well communicated, thereby clearing any misconception that could lead to suspicion among her francophone neighbours. Commenting further Akinterinwa added that:

the acquisition of proficiency in the French language in Nigeria, which has the potential to also prompt a better understanding of the way of life in Francophone Africa, and therefore, an appreciation of better understanding as a basis for maintenance of regional peace and security... (www.thisdaylive.com)

French language studies thus affords Nigerians the understanding of the socio-political structures of her francophone neighbours thus strengthen diplomatic ties with them. It will also help the Nigerian security and foreign mission staffs to be proficient in French thereby affording better intelligence gathering and sharing which is very crucial for mapping out security and conflict

resolution strategies particularly in this time of cross-border insurgency and terrorism. In addition, negotiations can also be effected in the favour of the Nigeria’s national interest as Nigerians who are proficient French language are used for such negotiations in contrast to cases where third parties who are often francophone translators are used.

In fact, the need for language acquisition is very imminent in our today’s world that has transformed into a global village. Hence, for Nigeria to effectively propagate her foreign policy, she must encourage foreign language acquisition particularly that of French language. Moreover, language remain an effective medium for propaganda among nation states. Therefore, Nigeria needs to promote French language studies so as to equip her citizens through whom she can propagate her interest as well assert her hegemony with the West African sub-region and Africa also by extension wield her influence in the international arena.

Ways of exploring French Languages studies for effective Conflict Resolution between Nigeria and Her Francophone Neighbour.

Having seen the importance French language studies in the resolution of conflicts between Nigeria and her francophone neighbour, how then can Nigeria adequately explore French studies to her advantage particularly in resolving conflicts with her neighbours? It is an established fact that a country is usually a reflexion of her educational system be it formal or informal. Thus, the lack of proficiency of most Nigerians in French language despite decades of integrating it into the Nigerian education curriculum reflects the state of French language studies in Nigeria. How then can Nigerian improve her French language teaching and learning so as achieve proficiency and in turn enhance communication between an average Nigerian and a francophone? Some practical steps toward the acquisition of French to meet life needs and challenges are outlined below:

- Nigeria must have a more assertive education policy towards French language studies. French should be made compulsory in all the Nigerian education system and at all levels as is the case of



English language. This way a large portion of her population could be made proficient in French thus facilitating communication with her francophone particularly between communities that live that border towns. This will help minimise inter-border clashes among bordering communities.

- The Nigerian French language studies curriculum and teaching methodology should be structured to suit the nation's needs and aspirations particularly with regards to the Nigeria relations with her francophone neighbours and the world by extension. Instructional materials should be tailored to instil skills of cognitive hypothesising, inferring, problem solving, negotiating, distinguishing fact from belief and expressing opinions in French language taking into cognisance its sociocultural context
- Language immersion programmes should be encouraged by the government through funding. Further the immersion programme should not be limited to only classroom activities but should be structured in such a way that it exposes students to real life situation thus drilling students to proficiency at the same time familiarising the learners with sociocultural realities in the francophone nations. For innovation enterprise, professional and formation institutions, the Nigerian government should negotiate with the francophone countries for exchange of experts. This way, our foreign mission and security personnel

will acquire proficiency and professional skill that will help them to effectively defend Nigeria's interest particularly in conflict resolution. It will also help act as better mediators as they have often done in Africa.

Conclusion

Language is a trait that is peculiar to humans. It is the chief medium through which they communicate their ideas and intentions. It is also explored by man to solve life challenges; one of which is conflict. Conflict is a universal phenomenon that exist in every human existence and coexistence. It is of great advantage if adequately managed but could bring devastating effect if not properly handled. Thus, the act of conflict resolution is a complex one that requires well-structured strategies. However, the main medium through which these strategies are actualised is language. Therefore, lack of language proficiency can be a major hampering factor to conflict resolution as intentions are not properly communicated.

Thus, this paper advocates the need for Nigeria to expand and diversify the scope of her French languages studies considering her geopolitical location so as to effectively resolve conflicts with her francophone neighbours. To this effect, a more assertive language education policy on French language studies backed with prompt implementation should be considered. Finally, this paper recommends a pragmatic approach to the teaching and learning of French language in Nigeria. This way, French language could be explored to solve real life challenges such as resolution of conflicts.

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