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# **The Role of a Foreign Language (English) in the Socio-Economic-Cum-Political Development of a French Nation: A Case Study of Bénin Republic**

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## **Abstract**

*The world is gradually becoming a global village and for proper understanding of each other, emphasis must be placed on the promotion of languages either indigenous or foreign. This paper therefore takes a look at the significance of foreign language (English language) in the socio-economic-cum-political development of Bénin Republic. And for English language to play such a vital role in a French speaking country like Bénin Republic, the author put forward some salient recommendations towards creating an international forum for Bénin Republic through an effective integration of English language in the life of a French speaking nation like Bénin.*

**Keywords:** Language, foreign language, development, language situation, multicultural and multi-lingual.

## **1.0 Background**

Bénin Republic is a country located in West Africa and shares international boundaries with the Federal Republic of Nigeria in the East, Togo in the West, Burkina Faso and Niger in the North while in the South we have the Atlantic Ocean. It has its political capital as Porto Novo while the economic capital is

Cotonou. It has a land area of 145,260sq km and estimated population of more than 8 million.

According to Théophile (2013), historically, the Portuguese were the first Europeans to undertake voyages on discovery along the African coast starting from the 15<sup>th</sup> century and their arrival marked the arrival of other Europeans like French and English, hence Bénin's contact with the French began with the arrival of the Portuguese into the city of Porto-Novo in the 15<sup>th</sup> century through trade relation and later French came in and established a French Colony known as Dahomey. Dahomey, now Bénin Republic attained independence from French government on the first of August, 1960. After her independence, Bénin Republic inherited French, the language of the foreign imperial power and since then French language got itself implanted as the official and unifying language with the multi-cultural and multi-lingual Béninois society.

After a lot of political instabilities and series of military coups d'état and with the arrival of the late General Mathieu Kerekou into power in 1972, the country name was changed from Dahomey to Bénin Republic. Bénin is today one of the most successful democratic experiments in Africa and regular reference is often made to its political and religious stability and as a model to other African nations.

Bénin is a country endowed with agricultural resources especially in the area of production of cotton and this makes the country the most largest producer of cotton in the world. According to Bada (2004), "Bénin Republic is made up of seven administrative regions (département) namely:

- Département de l'Atlantique
- Département des Collines
- Département du Littoral

- Département du Mon
- Département du Zou
- Département de l’Ouémé
- Département du Plateau’’.

While each region is headed by a Préfet (governor), in each of the region, we have local governments (les mairies) headed by (les maires) the local government chairmen.

## **2.0 Language Situation in Bénin Republic**

Before going into the role that English language could play in the socio-economic development of Bénin republic, let us take a look at the language situation in Bénin republic. According to Ade-Ojo (1997), cited by Ajani (2015), “language is a medium of communication par excellence”. Everybody expresses himself or herself through language. Animals speak their languages; birds have their own language, etc. Furthermore, in Ade-Ojo, S. (1997) point of view, natural phenomena like winds, water, thunder and rain have their own languages.

Language could be acquired in a formal or informal way. While language acquired from our parents could be classified as informal, the one acquired through a formal training in a school could be classified as a formal language. According to Kwamé (2009), “language is a complex system of habit by which sounds are used as symbols for the experience a speaker wishes to convey”. Anwal (2011), is of the view that language consists of at least three systems of habits, namely:

- Those by which sounds are organized or the “phonology” of language.
- Those by which experiences are recognized or the “syntax” of language.

- Those by which sounds and meanings are linked together, that is, the “semantics” of the language.

Bénin republic is a multilingual and multi-ethnic society with about 67 indigenous languages existing along French language. According to Capo (2004) major language spoken in Bénin apart from French language that is used as official and administrative language are ‘Gbe’, ‘Ede’ (Yorùbá), ‘Bokoo’, ‘Centhea’, ‘Baatonum’, ‘Hausa’, ‘Ayeneka’, ‘Fulfude’, ‘Gourma’, ‘Biyobe’, ‘Basile/Arini’, ‘Kabiye’. Some of these languages as observed by Capo (2004) are also spoken in countries like Nigeria, Togo and Ghana.

According to Béninois constitution of December 11, 1990, French language is not only official language but also a means of teaching in schools from primary to higher institutions, while English language is taught only in secondary and higher institutions.

### **3.0 The Presence of English as a Foreign Language in Bénin Republic**

For a clear understanding of the presence of English as a foreign language in Bénin, we need to start by asking ourselves, what do we understand by a mother tongue, a second language or official language? A mother tongue is a language acquired by a child from childhood through parental influences. It is an indigenous language. A second language is that language that exists side-by-side this indigenous language.

In a bilingual or multilingual situation like the case of Bénin republic as well as the case of other African countries, a second language is usually an official language put in place by the colonial masters. It is usually the language of education,

administration, commerce, etc. hence, while it is English language in Nigeria, it is French language in Bénin.

A foreign language, on the other hand, is a language acquired for a more distant goal; and it carries with it an element of choice either by the individual or by institutions of learning. It could be English language, German language, French language, Arabic, or even, Russian language. In Bénin republic, as at the present time, English is the dominant foreign language. Therefore, our paper would be highly focused on its role in the area of socio-economic-political development of the country.

Linguists often speak of language in terms of language families. According to Touré (2009) cited by Ajani (2015), when the linguists do this, they are usually acting on the assumption that groups of people who speak different languages were personally part of the same group and spoken in much the same way in earlier times. In this view, different languages were merely different dialects, which have developed divergences, more and more in the course of time, until they have come to be regarded as different languages. This applied to all the languages all over the world; and of course, English language is not an exception. Hence, English language belongs to the group of Indo-European language family; a language family that is widely spread in Europe (Johnson, 2013).

The presence of English language in Bénin dates back to 1783; this was through the efforts of English missionaries around the region of Whydah (Stone, P. 2009). Since its introduction into the Béninois' society, the language has become a major foreign language taught not only the secondary schools, but also in the Universities, most especially at the University of Abomey Calavi where English is taught and learnt up to Ph.D level.

The questions that many Béninois who are ignorant of the roles of English language in a French-speaking country like Bénin might keep asking include the following.

- i. What is the usefulness of English language to Benin?
- ii. What vocational possibilities, does knowledge of English language open up to a Béninois?
- iii. To what extent is the mastering of English language relevant to the socio-economic advancement of Bénin?
- iv. How can the knowledge of English language best contribute to the Béninois' education and social goal?

#### **4.0 The Place of English Language in the Socio-Economic Development of Bénin**

Apart from the fact that knowledge of a foreign language helps the learner to acquire information about what is happening around the world so as to appreciate the cultural value of other nations; it also plays a significant roles in the socio-economic-cum-political development of a nation.

From the angles of international politics, Bénin Republic is a French speaking nation that cannot be isolated from the rest of the world. Bénin Republic is an active member of the United Nations, African Union (AU) and a founding member of ECOWAS-founded in 1975, by the joint efforts of Generals Yakubu Gowon and Gnassigbe Eyadema of Togo. In all these international organizations, the two major working languages are English and French, which are used for communication among member states. Nigeria urgently needs French language in the same way, Bénin needs English. Therefore, for Bénin to be a power broker in any of those international organizations she does not only require French language, but also, one additional

international language; and English language is the one needed most. Why?

- i. English is the most widely spoken language in the world, followed by French and Arabic. The implication of this is that if emphasis is highly placed on English language, Bénin as a nation highly stable politically has a lot to offer to other nations in the area of political stability most especially English countries within Africa continent.
- ii. Benin has a cordial relationship with Nigeria. Throughout the world, it is only Nigeria and Bénin that have their International Border post within the same building. This is to tell everybody to what extent the two countries co-exist. While Nigeria is an English-speaking country, Bénin is a French-speaking country. The cordiality that exists between the two could be used to lay down a solid foundation in the area of commerce and trade and this will be of high benefit to the two countries. However, without a good communication through languages, (French and English) this could not be possible.
- iii. In the area of social development, Bénin is a potential nation in the area of tourism. In Bénin republic, we have many tourist cities such as the city of Ouidah known for its annual voodoo festival. A traditional festival that is highly celebrated in Brazil and in Cuba. The city of Porto-Novo a city where the Portuguese first landed in West Africa. The city of Abomey, a city regarded as the Centre of Beninois culture.

## **5.0 Recommendation**

This paper hereby suggests the following recommendations:

- English language should be adopted constitutionally as a Béninois second official language and this will give a legal backing to English language as a second language of administration and commerce.
- English language should be a compulsory language to be taught and learnt in schools from the primary to higher institutions in Benin republic.
- British government should copy French government support to French language in English countries through the establishment of French cultural centers.
- In Bénin, hardly could one notice British efforts in promoting English language. The only support given to English language is from the American embassy who always celebrates annually English language day at the University of Abomey Calavi.
- Béninois / British Governments should be ready to give more scholarships to intended beninois learners of English language within and outside Benin republic.
- Finally, Béninois government and private establishments should always ready to absorb those that read English language into their working system.

## **6.0 Conclusion**

In a multilingual and multicultural nation like Bénin, placing emphasis on the use of English is highly welcomed and should be supported for reasons mentioned above and it is the belief of this paper that if various recommendations earlier stated in this paper are implemented, English language will end being a second official language of Bénin Republic and this will go a long way in boosting the economic cum social development of Bénin Republic.

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