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Developing a Foreign Language Policy for Nigeria

Introduction

The reference to *development* in the title of this paper raises a fundamental question as to the present status of foreign languages in Nigeria. There is no doubt that Nigeria has, over the years, had a remarkable contact with foreign languages. The question that remains to be answered is whether Nigeria can be said to have evolved or developed a policy on foreign languages.

Where there is no linguistic contact whatsoever between a country and a foreign language, that country is free to consider the question of a foreign language policy a non-issue. Not so however, for a country that increasingly comes into contact with foreign languages. For such a country, not to have a policy on foreign languages will be a sign of political and administrative underdevelopment. Borrowing a definition from Hornby's *Advanced Learners Dictionary of Current English*, a policy is a "plan of action, statements of aims and ideals especially one made by a government, political party or business company." In the case of Nigeria there is no such generally known document which gives direction to the involvement with foreign languages in Nigeria. Thus, any use of the phrase such as towards a new Foreign Language Policy needs to be justified. One of the basic claims of this paper is that the foreign language policy of the Federal Republic of Nigeria is yet to be developed. This exercise seeks to make a contribution towards the development of a foreign language policy for Nigeria. We shall look at the issue of the foreign language policy within the context of an overall language policy in Nigeria.

The Present Situation

At last a national language policy – so goes a subtitle in Adegoke (1982: 200). However what we find in this *landmark document* (Adegoke (1982: 201), is a peripheral statement on language within the context of national education policy up to the secondary school level. Even Adegoke who sees the document as a *landmark document* complained that it is silent on the place of Nigerian languages in the universities. His critical observation way back in 1982 that not much had been done in the direction of the implementation of the policy remains just as valid now in the year 2001.

Adegoke belongs to the class of Nigerian ultra nationalists who see virtually no role for foreign languages in the scheme of things in Nigeria as the following questions posed by him clearly suggest:

> If so much of our budget is absorbed by English because we want a medium for inter-linguistic and international communication, is it wise or necessary to introduce French as a second world language?
>
> That we must we introduce Russian, German etc. in our schools simply because a few Nigerians do go to those places?" (Adegoke 1982: 203)

The attitude to foreign languages in certain quarters seems for quite understandable reasons to be situated within the context of a national response to Nigeria's colonial past. This response tends to go in the direction of shifting the focus away from foreign languages to Nigerian languages. Thus Government seems to have been very wary of making definitive statements on the status of foreign languages. In spite of this reservation, the factors of the geo-political power structure, particularly in the era of military dictatorship in Nigeria, have allowed Arabic to be singled out from among the foreign languages as the language about which there are clearly specified aims and objectives. Whereas the modern European languages like French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, and Italian were just listed as subjects offered at the university level, a

detailed description of aims and objectives was given in connection with Arabic as follows:

1. To enable the students to acquire spoken or written competence in the Arabic language.
2. To acquaint students with the socio-cultural, commercial, political, and diplomatic aspects of the life of the speakers of the language, with a view to promoting international understanding.
3. To equip students with adequate training for jobs in the fields of teaching, translation and interpretation, administration, journalism and diplomatic service.

(AMSA: 14)

Hardly does one need a more comprehensive statement of aims and objectives for the world languages currently studied in Nigerian Universities. In spite of the misgivings in certain quarters about the desirability of encouraging foreign languages in Nigeria, the Nigerian Government has been making some furtive moves to carve out a role of some sort to one of the foreign languages. The overture towards French is a welcome development, if indeed the policy could be actualised beyond the paper on which it is articulated. However, the issue of a foreign language policy is wider than the status of French in Nigeria. For one thing, other foreign languages apart from French have established themselves in Nigeria at the governmental official, and the non-governmental official and private levels. This makes the question as to whether Nigeria needs a foreign language policy an idle one. The issue is not whether or not Nigeria needs a foreign language policy but how to evolve or develop one. Apparently there is no better way of depicting the involvement with foreign languages in contemporary Nigeria other than practice without theory, implementation without policy, haphazard and uncoordinated.

The nation's universities offer courses in foreign languages such as French, German, Portuguese, Russian and there are departments of foreign languages and in spite there is no clear-cut policy on how the

products of such endeavours will fit into the overall national development.

The progress in the overall national development of Nigeria cannot be divorced from the need to adequately address the foreign language question. The foreign language question itself is a part of the general language policy of a nation, this general language policy consisting of the policy on indigenous languages and the policy on foreign languages. None of these two major aspects of language policy can be considered irrelevant or unimportant.

Language Policy at the Crossroads

Nigeria from what has been discussed in the fore-going, does not yet have a language policy. At best one can speak of yet to be properly defined outlines of a language policy. The language policy must answer the question about what to do with the multiplicity of the indigenous languages and the foreign languages with which Nigeria necessarily has to interact. What today appears as a language policy remains at the periphery of the guidelines of the educational system. According to this tacit reference to language policy, every child is expected to be instructed at least in the first school years in his/her mother tongue. Furthermore each pupil should learn apart from his/her mother tongue one of the three major Nigerian languages, Hausa, Igbo, or Yoruba. The present reality, however, is that all these guidelines have for various reasons failed to take off.

While some reference has been made to indigenous languages, there is not yet in existence a foreign language policy that can qualify for such a name. All that can be said at the official level is that French is offered in several secondary schools in the south of Nigeria and in a few in the north. It is interesting at this point to refer to the declaration during the Abacha era to the effect that French is the "second official language" of Nigeria. What this declaration actually means till date remains a mystery to the generality of Nigerians. Clearly political expediency is a weak basis for language policy.

The leading position of French in an eventual foreign language policy in Nigeria remains more or less undisputable, given the fact that almost all the countries that surround Nigeria are French speaking. Yet the reference to French does not yet adequately account for the foreign language question in Nigeria. The necessity for a balanced language policy in Nigeria is also a matter of making a break with the colonial past. Nigeria must develop to the point where as a nation it can look at the external world from the point of view of national interest and not from the eyes of the British. The time must come and it has come for Nigeria to have nationals who could directly access and interpret events in foreign nations with which Nigeria has dealings.

A comprehensive view of the language policy situation in Nigeria and perhaps other former British colonies on the one hand and former French colonies on the other hand shows a marked difference. This difference can be linked to the cultural policy of the former colonial powers in each case. While the French through their assimilation policy promoted the foreign languages over and above the indigenous, the British on their own part sought to monopolize their captured territories and reserve it exclusively for English in the guise of a preference for the encouragement of the indigenous languages. It is from this difference of point of emphasis that one can explain the fact exhibited by the status of language policy in Africa today. In the African francophone countries the foreign language policy is well advanced and clearly articulated while the indigenous languages are virtually neglected. In the English speaking African countries there is a greater emphasis on the indigenous languages while the policy on the foreign languages remains rather nebulous.

The learning of foreign languages like English, German, and Spanish begins right from the secondary school in the French-speaking African countries like Togo, Cote d'Ivoire, Cameroon among others. It is for this reason that we find that public office holders from the French speaking countries are much more able to express themselves in foreign languages. It must however be emphasized that the language policy question cannot be an either/or affair. It is not that of choosing to promote either the indigenous languages or the

foreign languages. The language policy particularly for post-colonial societies is complete only when it has addressed both the issue if the indigenous and that of foreign languages. A good start has been made concerning the indigenous languages in Nigeria - what remains is to adequately address the foreign language question.

Proposal for the Comprehensive Language Policy

As earlier pointed out a post-colonial society like Nigeria of necessity has to look at language policy from the indigenous and foreign perspectives. Consequently our proposal for a language policy will address the twofold need of promoting indigenous and foreign languages. The educational system is the bedrock of the entire societal development. Accordingly the language policy must take its root in the educational system. The formulation and the effective implementation of language policy presupposes an acknowledgement of the central role of language in the educational process. The greater insight one has into the structure of language the easier it is to perform in other subject areas. One learning experience in language enhances a subsequent one. Contrary to claims that language learning unnecessarily overloads pupils and students it is actually an advantage for the overall learning process. In effect the strength of the educational system can be assessed by the extent to which it is based on a sound language policy. In spite of the much talked about language policy in the National Policy on Education, language – both indigenous and foreign – remains at the periphery of the school curriculum. There is a need for a change in the official guidelines for the choice of subjects in the secondary schools if Nigeria must establish a viable language policy. As we earlier observed a formidable language policy is indispensable for Nigeria's overall national development.

The system currently in use for the choice of subjects for the senior secondary school examination has virtually closed off any possibility of implementing the required language policy. Table 1 shows the three options presently available in the choice of subjects at the senior secondary school level:

Table 1. Options available in the choice of subjects at the senior school level

	OPTION A: Science class	OPTION B: Commercial class	OPTION C: Arts class
1 comp	English lang.	English lang.	English lang.
2 comp	Mathematics	Mathematics	Mathematics
3 core	Biology	Biology	Biology
4 core	Chemistry	Accounts	Christ. Rel. Know.
5 core	Physics	Commerce	Literature in English
6 elect	Agric. Science /Food and nutrition	Government	Government /History
7 elect	Geography /Literature in English	Economics	Economics
8 elect	Economics	Geography	Food and nutrition*
9 elect	Further mathematics	Food and nutrition	Yoruba lang.
10 require	Yoruba lang.	Yoruba	Yoruba literature
11 elect	French	French	French

In each of the options the student has to choose a maximum of nine subjects for the senior school examination on the basis of the priority of compulsory, core, required and elective courses. If we consider what it means for the students they have the following senior secondary examination subjects:

Table 2. Senior secondary school examination subjects

	In OPTION A:	In OPTION B:	In OPTION C:
1	English lang.	English lang.	English lang.
2	Mathematics	Mathematics	Mathematics
3	Biology	Biology	Biology
4	Chemistry	Accounting	Christ. Rel. Know.
5	Physics	Commerce	Literature in English
6	Agric. Science	Government	Government
7	Geography	Economics	Economics
8	Economics	Geography	Yoruba lang.
9	Yoruba	Yoruba	Yoruba Literature

Option A allows the students to continue their studies in science courses or social science courses; students who choose option B can continue their studies in the social sciences or art courses; and in

option C students have the choice between continuing with social science or arts courses.

Notice that, apart from English language, Biology, Mathematics and Yoruba (representing a local language), two other subjects: Geography and Economics are common, Economics being common to all three options while Geography is common to science and social. It is clearly observable that even though French is offered to some extent only in the arts option there is a possibility of its being done as an SSE subject, and even here it faces a very tough competition.

The language policy which we propose in this paper makes it possible in all three options for French or any other selected foreign language to be offered up to SSE level.

The *new proposal* is as follows:

All the options A, B; C (ie, Science, Social Science, and Arts) will have a common base of language and mathematics as follows:

Table 3a. Proposed common base for options A, B, C

	OPTION A, B, C:
1	English language - the national official language -
2	Yoruba language - the first local language L1 -
3	Hausa or Igbo - the other Nigerian language L2 -
4	French (or German, ...) - the foreign language FL –
5	Mathematics

In addition to the five subjects, the different options will add the following:

Table 3b. Proposed diversification for the options A, B, C

	OPTION A	OPTION B	OPTION C
6	Biology	Accounts	Christ. Rel . Know
7	Chemistry	Commerce	Lit. in English
8	Physics	Government	Government
9	Further Maths	Economics	Economics
10	Agric. Science	Geography	Geography
11	Economics	Computer Know.	Yoruba

The student will have the option of dropping any two out of the last three in the SSE-year. While the same condition that presently holds concerning compulsory and elective courses will continue to apply, registration for the SSE will only be complete when all the language courses and the other choice subjects have been duly registered for. Five 0/L credit passes in English and Mathematics and the core subjects will continue as usual to be the criterion of passing to proceed to higher levels.

These subject combinations are consistent with the requirements contained in the current edition of the brochure of the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB).

On the Choice of Foreign Languages

The choice of foreign Languages in Nigeria cannot be a static one - it has to be a dynamic one, depending on Nigeria's growth in international relations. However, there are foreign languages which by virtue of historical contact or their international salience have established their presence in Nigeria. It is imperative to incorporate such languages into the foreign language policy.

Some foreign languages are important to Nigeria because of their position in Africa, which is said to be the "centre-piece" of Nigeria's foreign policy. The languages in this category are Arabic, French, Portuguese, Swahili, and Spanish. Other foreign languages carve out a place for themselves in Nigeria's foreign language policy as a

result of their economic, scientific and technological importance. These are mainly French and German. Languages like Spanish and Portuguese are important to Nigeria because of the Yoruba Diaspora in Cuba and Brazil. All the foreign languages already mentioned, now including Russian, find their justification for consideration in Nigeria's foreign language policy through the demands of international relations. Spanish, for instance, opens up to Nigeria the entire Latin America, while through Russian insight can be gained into the Slavic culture.

The proposal presented here on the choice of the foreign languages is not exhaustive, but it is sufficient to show that underlying a foreign language policy is a global perspective. If Nigeria survives into the future as the present writer believes that it will, it will not be a narrow nationalistic nation, but a liberal nation with a global perspective.

The following foreign languages are, as an initial step, to be incorporated into the foreign language policy: Arabic, French, German, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Swahili.

The aim of the foreign language policy is not to make all Nigerians proficient in all these languages. It does not even envisage that every Nigerian will be able to speak a foreign language. It is rather to provide a basis for producing a crop of Nigerians who will eventually serve as resource persons in the various foreign language needs of the country. No tertiary institution is expected to offer courses in all the foreign languages. The present practice in which a department of foreign languages offers three or two foreign language courses is to continue. All that still needs to be done is to broaden the base of the foreign languages offered, and also to ensure that foreign language study is evenly spread across the nation. The spread across the nation must take cognisance of cultural antecedents and geographical proximity. In this regard institutions in the northern part of the country will continue to be strong centres of Arabic studies.

Even though French occupies a leading role among the foreign languages in Nigeria, and its presence can be taken for granted in various institutions, institutions in border-states will constitute strong centres of French studies. Apart from the fact that Nigeria has a need to enhance communication with the Portuguese speaking African countries, the cultural link over the years with the South-West of Nigeria suggests that Portuguese should be well represented in the South-West. Names of Lagosians like Da Rocha, Da Silva, Pinheiro, Fernandes remind us of the historical contact with the Portuguese. The name Lagos is itself a duplication of the name of a town in Portugal (Lagosians refer to their town as Èkòó).

Institutions in the industrial centres in Nigeria will have an advantage in offering courses in German. The greater proximity in the South-Eastern states to the Spanish speaking Equatorial Guinea and the historical and cultural links of the South-West with Spanish speaking Cuba would encourage the presence of Spanish in South-Western and South-Eastern institutions. For reasons which cannot be elaborated upon here, South-Eastern institutions will find Swahili an interesting and appropriate choice. Swahili will also be appropriate for institutions which constitute strong centres of Arabic.

The presence of a Russian community in Ajaokuta steel industry would be an advantage if the university of Abuja chooses Russian a one of the combinations for the foreign language study.

General Observations in Conclusion

The advantages of the new system proposed are substantial. It is of great advantage for the secondary school system. To begin with, a good grasp of language structure will sharpen the student's analytical tools and enable him/her to comprehend the other subject areas more easily. Secondly the possibility of coming into contact with another Nigerian language in a second-language learning situation will contribute immensely to the national integration efforts. Students will learn right from the early impressionistic stage to appreciate the culture of other national groups in Nigeria. Moreover with the new

proposal the secondary school becomes the bedrock of the foreign language policy. The secondary schools will be able to feed the universities with students who have received an initial preparation for the study of foreign languages.

It cannot be overemphasized that the acceptance and implementation of the overall language policy proposed here presuppose the existence of a political leadership which is prepared to take the work of national integration seriously and therefore consciously formulate and implement policies which will ensure a harmonious interrelationship among Nigerian nationalities. The political leadership must also be such that correctly recognises the global implications of Nigeria being the largest concentration of black-skinned peoples all over the world. It has the need to mature to the status of being the mouthpiece not only of Africa but also of Africans in the Diaspora. Consequently the global perspective of the foreign language policy is very imperative.

The language policy here proposed has therefore the following characteristics:

1 It addresses both the indigenous and the foreign language issues.
2 It sees language as a means of national integration.
3 It takes a global perspective on the issue of foreign language study.
4 It sees foreign language study as a means through which Nigeria can view the external world as a sovereign nation and no longer through the eyes of Britain.
5 It considers the secondary school as strategic base for the take off of the general language policy.

In the common language base at the secondary school level only English language and the L1 (Yoruba in the South-West) are fixed. The slot of the L2 is to be filled according to the judgement of the local education authorities. All that has to be borne in mind is the

need to ensure national balance and do away with the obnoxious South-North dichotomy and imbalance. L2 may not be restricted to the three majors of WAZOBIA, although there will be a tendency towards their preponderance. The choice will still be left to the local education authorities. L2 curriculum and syllabus must be designed to be distinct from the L1 syllabus in order not to unnecessarily overburden the students.

The slot of the FL can be filled with any of the foreign languages earlier referred to. Much as there will be a tendency for French to preponderantly fill the FL slot, it should not be exclusively for French. In fact a deliberate effort should be made to diversify the possibilities available to students, just as in the case of filling the L2 slot. As in the case of the L2 slot, the syllabus and the curriculum of the FL must take cognisance of the overall learning situation so as not to make unrealistic demands on students. In any case a substantial level of competence is expected to have been achieved after a period of six good years of exposure to the language, whether L2 or FL. Depending on the level of competence attained at the secondary school level a student may decide to continue with the L2 of FL at the tertiary level of education, the universities or the colleges of education.

It is gratifying to note that the proposal contained in this paper, radical as it may appear, is not entirely novel. French, German, Portuguese and Russian are already being offered in the nations universities. There are pilot secondary schools where German is already being offered as a school subject. What remains is a well-articulated policy statement on the part of Government on the language policy issue.

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