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Grenzenlos lernen: Giving New Impetus to the Teaching of German to Nigerian Students

Introduction

The era in which we live is one in which social and political trends are leading to more interest being generated in the idea of multiculturalism. It is certain that one of the distinctive features of the twenty-first century will be increased multilingualism: borders separating countries are disappearing, and the democratisation of the world continues unabated. This is bringing about more movement and, subsequently, more contact among the peoples of the world. Nigerians are, obviously, desirous of participating in this global movement, as more and more of them are seeking to acquire foreign languages which they are starting to perceive as potential trumps in their dealings with a modern and fast-changing world.

That is, there is a definite willingness, if not eagerness, perceivable on the part of the Nigerian populace to acquire foreign languages: there is a growing demand, for instance, for French and German in our institutions of higher learning. As a point of illustration, for the first time in the history of the Department of Foreign Languages at the Obafemi Awolowo University, a student who has completed three years of study in the sciences is seeking to transfer to our Department as a German student. He has already done levels I and II at the Goethe-Institut and now wishes to pursue his studies in languages. Institutions such as the German Cultural Centre (Goethe-Institut) and the Alliance Française are also registering more and more "unusual" students who are seeking to acquire foreign languages for a wide variety of reasons: doctors, businessmen, lawyers, civil servants, and other categories of persons.

Language education has thus become an important point of focus on the international level, and important bodies like the United Nations have been addressing the issue. The "Forum of Reflection", set up in 1993 to outline the principles that should guide UNESCO's activities for the following decade, recommended that efforts and resources should be dedicated primarily to the education of young people. A key aspect of that education was identified as the knowledge of other languages and the development of exchange programmes for young people, which would allow speakers of a language to experience another language, another culture, another world view. This would be a crucial aspect of their training as responsible *Weltbürger* (to borrow Goethe's term).

The teaching of German in Nigeria currently is lacking in the aspect of fostering contact or exchange with the native speakers and the culture of the target language. Since the cancellation of the Year Abroad programme in Germany, our students cannot be said to be having direct, unmediated contact with the target language and culture. This, obviously, would have and, indeed, has been having negative consequences regarding the quality of our products.

One of the objectives of this article, therefore, is to address the issue of the level of competence in the German language attained by those who are being trained in our higher institutions of learning. In this respect, it will be argued that the generally low standard of our students and the observed difficulty most of them have in correctly acquiring the various aspects of the German language (its phonetics and phonology as well as its grammar) must be attributable, at least partly, to the lack of "direct contact" materials in the teaching of the language. The corollary is also held to be true, namely, that the systematic exposure of students to the language and its culture through audio-visual teaching aids partly explains the better results obtained in the earlier years of German study in Nigeria (for example, in the seventies).

However, beyond the immediate concern for improved competence on the part of German language learners in our institutions is an equally pressing need: that of engaging our minds to reflect on some key issues having global dimensions and to understand how they

affect the way in which we conduct our business. This will be made clear below.

Certain concepts are currently in vogue, so to speak, and they represent new ways of conceptualising the world, particularly with respect to the way in which relations are conducted between individuals and collectives. Among these notions are the following: exchange, interdependence, mediation, participation, negotiation, partnership, and internationalisation. These concepts are finding application in almost every imaginable domain of human activity, and it is pertinent, to our thinking, to examine them and to see their pertinence to the domain of the teaching of foreign languages in general, and to the teaching of German in Nigeria in particular.

As was stated above, language education has become a matter of global concern. This will, therefore, be the focus of the next section of this article. On the international level, attention is currently turned on education so that it will assist in charting the course towards the construction of a new world order. The teaching and learning of foreign languages is clearly situated within the domain of education, and it is important to locate the discussion which is to follow in its proper context. The third section concerns the teaching of German in Nigeria. It will be in two parts: first, the sociological context in which the teaching is done will be examined. The discussion will be situated within the context of the emergent *pédagogie des échanges* (Alix and Bertrand 1994), and it will be argued that the teaching of foreign languages must be based on a philosophy of exchange and negotiated participation. In the second part of the section the notion of *grenzenlos lernen* ("apprendre sans frontières") will be presented as a way forward for German language teaching in Nigeria now, given the country's present economic situation.

Education and Language Education

> We no longer know in what world we are living . . . The international order established in the post-war period has fragmented along with our certainties including the very conceptual apparatus we had

> devised to understand it. The collapse of ideological walls could have been a 'providential catastrophe', opening up new scope for human creativity in a world enriched by its diversity, had the explosion of fears, hatred, violence of all kinds not suddenly created the brutal impression of a 'cultural collapse' of worldwide proportions. (Forum, 7-8)

This quotation is from the *report of the UNESCO Ad Hoc Forum of Reflection*, whose primary term of reference was to

> . . . reflect on UNESCO's role in the last decade of the twentieth century and to attempt to bring out new trends that could be an inspiration to the Organisation in the coming decade. (ibid., 1)

It is not our intention here to embark on a discussion of the myriads of problems confronting the planet at this point in history. The 'cultural collapse' mentioned in the report evokes all the global-dimension problems relating to drug abuse, the spread of infectious diseases, the ravages caused by ethnic wars, the degradation of the environment, illiteracy, poverty, political and economic instability, and so on. The reason that these problems are being alluded to here is because it is in seeking to find lasting solutions to them that international organisations like the United Nations (especially its cultural and educational arm, UNESCO) have identified education as the primary remedy to these ills. The same *report of the Forum of Reflection* further declares:

> . . . the Forum takes the view that viable solutions to most of the problems currently facing mankind ... are to be found principally in education and that UNESCO should therefore concentrate its energies in coming years primarily on education and, in particular, the education of young people. (ibid., 1)

We are standing at a crucial moment in the history of humanity, and it is imperative that appropriate training be given to the young ones so that they are properly equipped to face the challenges that they will be confronted with as the future unfolds. This means that the education of the youths should be very high on the priority list of all

countries at this time. The question, of course, is: what kind of education should be given to the young ones? In Nigeria, for example, one government after the other has paid lip service to the centrality of education in their development programmes, especially with respect to the technological advancement of the country. However, the sad reality is that not much has happened to make better education available to the citizens of the country. Indeed, it is not even certain that it is the kind of education that is required at this point in time that is being proposed.

The type of education required now does not simply aim at having the students acquire some specific competences in the disciplines of their choice. What is more important is to teach them a certain way of conceptualising things, of interacting with one's environment and with the world at large—and this, for Africans, is a big challenge indeed. The African school system is marked by a profound schism between the form and content of school experience on the one hand, and the role that graduates of our institutions are called upon to play in our societies on the other, so that they can properly serve the interests of their various countries. Marie-Angélique Savané of Senegal has remarked that the African school system does not really correspond to the development strategies of the various countries. For instance, while several African countries are seeking to embrace democracy, there is hardly any civic instruction in the public schools, and the whole system is marked by what she has termed "par-coeurisme" – rote learning – which is incapable of forming people who will truly be able to respond to the changing needs of their communities and their environment (UNESCO Sources, 1993, p. 14)

It was the late President François Mitterand of France who said during an interview, on the occasion of the bicentennial of the French Revolution, that the Revolution "was the prolongation, in political terms, of profound changes in ways of thinking, feeling and acting" (UNESCO Courier, June 1989, p. 4). Without any doubt, a profound modification of our ways of thinking, feeling and doing things is now very much needed in Nigeria, and Africa as a whole. One of the changes that are needed, according to Mitterand, is to

> . . . search for forms of cultural solidarity which respect the identity of everyone, cooperate without arrogance or excessive humility in the priority areas of education, science, and culture, the keys to a freely chosen destiny. (ibid., p. 6)

Thus, the new system of education envisaged should serve as a vehicle for transmitting new attitudes, especially with respect to the delicate balance between the individual identity and the recognition of the identity of the Other, and also regarding the tension that may result from old relationships being brought under scrutiny (for example, the dependant/benefactor relationship which exists between developing and developed countries).

Having looked at what should be the aims of education in general, we now turn our attention to language education in particular. We turn again to the *report of the UNESCO Forum of Reflection,* which recognises the importance of knowing other languages apart from one's own. It states:

> 12. An education in multiculturalism is essential in a world characterised by increasing ethnic, religious and linguistic interpenetration, and which is experiencing unprecedented population migrations.
>
> 13. With this aim in view, the Forum urges:
> - the revision, or better still, the multilateral co-production of school textbooks in order to prepare the ground for mutual understanding;
> - an introduction to the plurality of languages, religions and cultures;
> - the development of programmes of exchange for young people which would provide them with experience of another language, another culture and another vision of the world.
>
> (p. 3)

The role played by language in fostering mutual understanding is self-evident: we are naturally more favourably disposed towards

someone who speaks our language, and we stand a better chance of being accepted by someone whose language we speak. It is, therefore, around the concerns expressed by the Forum that a new branch of the teaching of foreign languages has evolved: the pedagogy of exchange. Why exchange? To our mind, this is the notion that underlies (and that should underlie) all the interpersonal and international contacts that are being realised in a world in which democratic principles are starting to acquire an unprecedented importance.

Exchange implies equality and symmetry of status, it has to do with the crossing of the boundary separating two entities so as to allow the passage of certain "goods" from one side to the other. This concept of exchange, according to Christian Alix and Gilles Bertrand (1994:4-5) has become an inalienable part of modern life, for it is implied in the very reality of our existence as citizens of the world. Moreover, since the knowledge of other languages apart from one's own is now considered as an indispensible tool with which all persons should be armed, this means that language practitioners now stand before a big challenge: we are being asked not only to teach the (technical) knowledge of languages to learners; we are expected, at the same time; to transmit to them in the course of their training a certain way of relating to the world, a new global culture which would ensure their full participation in the world of the twenty-first century. This, of course, is in addition to the exposure to the culture of the target language being acquired. This, clearly, is no mean job for the contemporary language teacher! The question, then, is: are we able to rise up to this challenge?

Why is it that training in multilingualism should be seen as one of the major ways of ensuring the success of the new education which, in turn, would make certain the citizens' effective participation in the modern world? The answer is that there is probably no better way of teaching this new culture of exchange which is becoming a major determining factor of human interactions. In no other discipline is the student confronted with the Other as in the language class: another language, another culture, another "Weltanschauung". It is important that this "confrontation" be properly managed and

mediated, and this is one of the major goals that should be pursued by the pedagogy of exchange.

The Teaching of German in Nigeria

This section deals with the teaching of the German language in Nigeria. It starts, however, by first discussing the sociological context and the philosophical underpinnings of the enterprise. The reasoning is that the teaching of the language cannot be seen as an isolated activity; rather, it is embedded in a larger context of Nigerian-German relations which should be clearly understood.

The sociological context

Materials already exist in which the history of the teaching of the German language in Nigeria has been well documented. Arnd Witte (1997) discusses the beginnings of German language teaching in Nigeria and identifies very clearly the arguments that are usually proffered as justification for the existence of "eine Germanistik in Afrika". He mentions three of them: (1) the need for African nations (and Nigeria in particular) to have people who are competent in German to do their business for them, and not to keep relying on third parties; (2) the thinking that contact with Germany (and through the language) will move the African country towards the attainment of technological development; and (3) the expectation that exposure to the history, literature and culture of a developed country like Germany would afford Africans (Nigerians) the opportunity of making comparisons with their own, and they would come to realise that they are at a stage of development which countries like Germany had equally passed through at an earlier period of their history as well.

Witte's criticism of these arguments (and probably others that follow a similar rationale) are quite perceptive. What comes out clearly from the above is that it is only the African country that stands to benefit from the learning of the German language. The notion of exchange which was discussed above does not come into the picture at all. According to Witte, „. . . die Germanistik in Afrika findet nicht im herrschaftsfreien Raum oder unter gleichberechtigen

Partnern statt"; rather, he characterises the relation between German and Third World countries as involving „asymmetrische Machtverhältnisse" (1997: 27, 28).

The issue being raised here has to be clearly understood. It is not supposed to be a one-sided criticism, that is, of the Germans, who may be accused of being "paternalistic" in their dealings with Third World countries in particular—"Am deutschen Wesen soll die Welt genesen" (ibid., p.29). The fact is that many Africans too, on their part, suffer from a dependency syndrome, which they do not seem ready to shake off. We have come to believe, for example, that any foreign language that we learn must be almost totally funded by the country whose language it is. Thus, we expect France to fund our French teaching programmes at all levels, Germany to fund the German programmes, and so on - as if we were doing those countries a favour by learning their languages.

The new century we have entered into, it has been mentioned before, is one in which this idea of exchange will play a greater role in human relations. Relations will have to be negotiated, and this will not only be in cases having to do with conflict resolution (as between the Israelis and the Palestinians, for example); no, all relations will have to be negotiated, with each partner bringing to the table something that will be offered in exchange for what the other party has brought. It is, therefore, not in the interest of Germany to continue with any "paternalistic" tendencies, nor is it in the interest of a country like Nigeria to persist in her beggarly ways. Exchange means equality in partnership, and it is true partnership that can lead to real benefits being reaped by the two sides. This was clearly echoed during the United Nations Millennium Conference held in New York in September 2000.

The challenge, therefore, is for Nigerians to start really engaging their minds on the issue: what do we have to offer? In a paper read at the annual conference of the NUFTA (Nigerian University French Teachers' Association) in February 2000, I spoke on the "cooperation" between France and Nigeria regarding the teaching of French in the country. The fact of the matter is that France plays a vital role financially: sponsoring conferences of the associations of

French teachers (secondary schools, colleges of education and universities); offering scholarships for teachers to attend courses in France or here in Nigeria; funding the Nigeria French Language Village in Badagry; donating books to schools, colleges and universities; etc. Thus, France is a major contributor to all French-related activities in Nigeria. This, actually, might be thought to be a normal situation. The problem, however, is the following: France not only sponsors the teaching of French in Nigeria, she equally sponsors the teaching of Nigerian languages (Hausa, Yoruba) in France, funding the research missions of the lecturers to Nigeria, paying for Nigerians to work as teaching assistants at French institutions.

This example was given to illustrate the obvious lopsidedness and imbalance of this kind of *cooperation*. Nigeria, for example, could be the one sponsoring the teaching of her languages in France, even if only partially, and that would be a more balanced kind of partnership. The argument normally advanced is that we are a poor nation; but we all know that we would not be so poor if corruption were not so endemic in our society. It was a staggering revelation indeed when the World Bank representative at a seminar held in Cotonou on January 14, 1998, declared that more than 70% of the funds which the financial institution makes available for development projects in Africa ended up in private pockets. This is why the World Bank started demanding that governments receiving its aid sign an *Integrity Pact*. Nonetheless, maybe the World Bank too has to learn the new rules for cooperation and also look to introduce the notion of exchange into their dealings with developing nations.

For the teaching of German in Nigeria, it might be useful to start thinking of the enterprise in terms of true cooperation and exchange. Maybe the result would be that beyond merely producing a group of fairly competent users of the German language we might actually end up forging a new and better relationship, engendering trust and mutual respect which leads to greater benefits being reaped by both sides.

Grenzenlos lernen

Among the constituent parts of the new pedagogy of exchange are travel and correspondence, with the latter acting as a kind of forerunner for the former: the exchange of correspondence between learners and the native speakers of the target language serves to prepare the ground for the eventual encounter with the target culture. Thus, direct, unmediated contact with the target culture has come to be considered a major aspect of the foreign language learning experience. Alix and Bertrand (op. cit., p.7) talk about the widening out of the domain of foreign language teaching towards instruction in exchange and encounter ("l'élargissèment de la didactique des langues étrangères vers une didactique de l'échange et de la rencontre")

This is a direct challenge to us here in Nigeria concerning our foreign language programmes, for this aspect of "encounter", of direct contact with the target culture is no longer present in them. At the very moment when most of the rest of the world was recognising the need for and the importance of this aspect of foreign language learning and committing themselves to making it a vital part of their programmes, we here were putting an end to our Year Abroad programmes. Citing the lack of funds due to the downturn in the economic fortunes of the nation as an excuse, the Nigerian government decided to cancel the Year Abroad programmes for French and Arabic and, instead, build French and Arabic Language Villages at which the students could spend the third year of their university training. According to the Project Document for the Establishment of the French Language Village, the reasons for the establishment of the language villages were twofold:

i. to obviate the need for foreign exchange expenditure to service the Year Abroad programme;

ii to promote greater self-reliance in the teaching of French and Arabic languages by making optimal utilisation of local human and material resources.

The circumstances leading to the cancellation of the Year Abroad programme in German were somewhat different. For several years

before then (1995), the financial burden of the programme had been borne primarily by the students themselves, through their parents and guardians. The major reason that led to its cancellation was the fact that students sent to Germany were choosing to stay there permanently and not return to their universities to complete their studies. The foreign language departments thus became travel agencies through which students made their escape to greener pastures abroad. To date, there should be no less than a hundred students of the Obafemi Awolowo University who have refused to return from their Year Abroad.

The universities, obviously, had to do something about this situation, for they certainly could not accept to keep admitting students for four-year degree programmes only to have them stay for two years and then disappear. The solution that was found was the "Equivalent Year Abroad Programme" (EYAP), which is run by the Goethe-Institut. The question that must now be addressed is to determine whether we have found the permanent solution to the Year Abroad problem, now that it has been run for some four sessions.

Indeed, not only EYAP, but the whole of our German language programme needs to be examined in the light of the current developments in foreign language pedagogy discussed in this paper. We must ask ourselves whether we are doing what we are supposed to be doing in order to ensure that the training we are offering our students is such that they will be properly equipped to function effectively in the world of the twenty-first century.

Given that the economic situation which led to Nigerian students seeking all possible avenues of fleeing the country has not yet been reversed, it is difficult to argue for an immediate return to our Year Abroad programme in Germany. It is certain that if students were allowed today to leave for Germany most of them would still not return to complete their programmes here, except a way of forcing them to do so were devised. However, while waiting for the time when Nigerian students too could once again have the experience of direct contact with the languages they are learning, certain efforts could be made now towards greatly improving the quality of the training offered within the country.

That there is a need for improvement is self-evident, given the general state of educational institutions within the country. Since the mid-80s (marking the beginning of the downward turn in the Nigerian economy), a certain process of decay set in which has culminated in what we now see around us. Obviously, the students trained in our institutions up until the mid-eighties were able to attain a higher level of competence: audio-visual materials were still functional, language laboratories had not yet fallen into disrepair, current books were available in the libraries. That many of the students we have produced in the 90s have been of such poor quality is, therefore, not surprising, as language teachers have had to contend with all kinds of constraints.

It is in recognition of the various constraints that teachers and students in poorer nations of the world have to contend with that the UNESCO proposed the idea of education *sans frontières*, learning without borders. During the presentation of the *report of the Forum of Reflection* at the UNESCO in October 1993 (at which occasion I had the opportunity of being present) the French philosopher, Michel Serres, proposed that a new system of distance learning, termed *apprendre sans frontières* be established. The reasoning behind this, according to the members of the Forum, was the following:

> Education, science, technology and culture are contributing to the accentuation of inequalities instead of encouraging equity. The separation caused by these inequalities are daily becoming deeper and more dangerous... It is estimated that the demand for education is growing at the date of 10% per year. We must now seek to use this impressive mass of tragically under-used mediums: television, radio, audio and video-cassettes, electronic mail, software, etc. (Source, UNESCO, p.23)

What this means for us is that our students must be provided with this opening towards the contemporary world even as they learn the German language. Through audio and video recordings they will have direct contact with the German language and culture, and this will, certainly, be most beneficial for them. However, they must also

be brought in contact with the instruments with which the modern world is conducting business, primarily the computer. This has become a major factor in education now. For example, the former United States President, Bill Clinton, declared that a major project he would pursue during his second term in office was to make sure that every American child of school age was computer literate. The Internet has taken over the world, and those who cannot operate in this mode will most certainly be left behind.

We cannot continue to persist in our poverty mentality. Funds must be found, in whatever way possible, to equip our language departments with satellite dishes, computers, television-sets and VCRs, etc., to ensure that the training we give our students will properly equip them for the future. We have no other choice.

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