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FRENCH STUDIES IN NIGERIAN PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES: A CASE STUDY OF COVENANT UNIVERSITY

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Abstract
In Nigeria there is this restricted view that 'French' as a discipline has to do with just the study of French language as a means of communication. Consequently, there is usually low subscription with regard to the study of French in Nigerian Private Universities, where the school fee is relatively high. In the Federal and State Universities where the fee is low and subscription higher, most of the candidates that take up French as a programme of study, do so out of desperation. They resort to French just to be in the university. The choice of this topic is therefore largely out of a desire to contextualize 'French studies' as a discipline, highlight its status and challenges at Covenant University, sensitize the Nigerian public on the necessity of French studies in Nigeria by highlighting its relevance to the nation for a global impact. Furthermore, as Covenant University is poised to raise a new generation of leaders and with its present continuous drive for Innovation, Impact and Internationalization, this paper intends to disabuse the minds of Nigerians of the notion that French is merely the study of the language as a means of communication. We conclude by proffering solutions to the challenges, proposing the way forward and showing the benefits that accrue to students that study French as a discipline.

Key-words: French Studies, Nigerian Private Universities, Status, Challenges, Covenant University

Résumé
Au Nigeria, il y a ce point de vue restreint que «français» en tant que discipline a à faire avec simplement l'étude de la langue française comme moyen de communication. Par conséquent, il est généralement faible en ce qui concerne son abonnement aux études universitaires dans les universités privées nigérianes, où les frais de scolarité sont relativement élevés. Dans les universités publiques où les frais sont moins élevés, l'abonnement est aussi élevé puisque la plupart des candidats qui l'abonnent le font en désespoir. Ils recourent au français simplement pour être admis à l'université. Le choix de ce thème est donc en grande partie d'un désir de conceptualiser les études françaises »comme discipline, mettre en évidence son statut et défis à Covenant University, sensibiliser le public nigérian sur la nécessité des études françaises au Nigeria en mettant en évidence sa pertinence à la nation pour un impact global. En

outre, comme Covenant University est prête à élever une nouvelle génération de dirigeants et avec sa présente motivation pour l'innovation, pour l'impact et pour l'internationalisation, ce document entend désabuser les esprits des Nigérians de la notion que le français est seulement l'étude de la langue en tant que moyen de communication. Nous concluons en proférant des solutions aux défis, en proposant la voie à suivre ainsi qu'en mettant en évidence les avantages qui découlent des études françaises comme discipline.

Mots-clés: Études française, universités privées du Nigeria, Etat, défis, Covenant University

1. Introduction

A critical look at the title of this paper, two ideas readily come to mind: examining the French programme in Nigerian private universities as it were, then a critical analysis of same in Covenant University. French, as Nigeria's second official language, is studied at the primary and secondary school levels; but as one moves up the educational ladder, the tempo declines, especially in the private universities. Differently put, French studies, in Nigerian private universities, as a programme of study, is not as viable or vibrant as the other programmes of study in the country. Such development calls for a review of the curriculum planning in the country.

In Nigeria, French is recognized as the 'second official language'. It was in 1996, in Ouagadougou, Burkina-Faso, that the one-time Head of State of Nigeria, the late General Sanni Abacha, declared French as Nigeria's second official language to enable the country interact easily and more effectively with its francophone neighbouring countries and participate effectively in and attend international conferences and seminars. The declaration of French as the second official language of Nigeria paved more way for the recognition of the language education by some policy-makers in Nigeria. In a bid to dissect the status of French in Nigeria and analyse the teaching of the course as a programme of study, Timothy-Asobele (1999:17), quoting a former Nigerian Head of State, has this to say:

> The most important speech on the future of French in Nigeria was the one that General Babangida delivered in Abuja on July 7th 1987, at the Summit of the ECOWAS Heads of State. The General said that the most cynical of our detractors would appreciate the efforts we have made since the "Suns of Independence" to be closer to our francophone brothers of the ECOWAS. We have, among other measures, favoured the teaching of French in the second round of our education system. "Please, my dear brothers, try to take another step in our search for understanding in our Region". This step is to establish, in our education systems, fully bilingual schools where the ECOWAS member states will be sending their students. Please, ensure that the staff of the various schools are recruited into the member countries of the ECOWAS. That is the issue of the ECOWAS 2000. (Our translation of the original text in French).

The necessity for the acquisition of a second official language by every citizen of any country cannot be overemphasized since such a language can be used for administrative and/or official purposes. However, it is pertinent to stress that the status and value accorded French in Nigerian educational system by the Educational Policy Makers has not been very satisfactory when compared with other subjects or courses offered at our three levels of education. On the status of French language education in Nigeria as highlighted in the National Policy on Education (NPE), Ademola (2011:Online) observes that it is just a mere paper work. To him, it was partially defined. He opines that is why French is not only optional at secondary schools but a non-vocational subject. Candidly speaking, many primary and secondary schools in Nigeria do not offer French.

Our concern in this paper is therefore to examine the status of French studies in Nigerian private universities by carrying out a critical analysis of the French programme at Covenant University. We shall discuss this study by working round the following questions, namely: (i) What is the status of French generally in Nigeria? (ii) What can be said about the presence of French in the primary, secondary and the tertiary institutions in Nigeria? (iii) What are the challenges facing the teaching and learning of French in the Nigerian educational system? (iv) What are the challenges of the French programme at Covenant University since inception? (v) What is the way forward? – the benefits that accrue to the

graduates of French: at the individual and at the national levels, - the job and career prospects among others.

2. Review of Related Literature

It is pertinent at this point to look at some related views of some earlier researchers on French Studies in Nigerian schools. Anneduke (2009:Online) carried out a research on the attitude of Nigerians towards the French programme. In an attempt to stress the fact that the status of the French programme in Nigeria is facing some challenges as a result of the poor attitude of Nigerian citizens towards it. He has this to say:

> There is a growing concern about the attitude of Nigerians towards the study of French in our schools. A good number of them are not sufficiently informed about the usefulness of French in our educational system or its importance as an international language. They feel that people who study French language especially in the tertiary institutions are slow learners, or a course for dumping students who did not pass their intended course of study.

He goes on to reiterate the fact that such people see the study of French as a waste of time. In a similar vein, Alata (2004: Online) points out the fact that French is regarded as an alien language and, as such, many Nigerians see its imposition as a second national language in Nigeria as inappropriate for the socio-economic development needs of the Nigerian citizens. Ibanga (2007:42) carried out his own research on the underutilization of French graduates in secondary schools in Makurdi Local Government area of Benue State. He observes with dismay that there is a growing lukewarm attitude of Nigerians towards the study of French, going by the way the French teachers in the secondary schools in Makurdi Local Government of Benue state are underutilized. The same author further argues that French is being relegated to the background in Nigeria as compared with English, Nigeria's colonial Masters' language. He is of the opinion that Nigerians should be well-versed in French as their second official language as declared by the late General Sanni Abacha in 1996. He sees it as unfortunate that such is not the case; that

even some French teachers in the country are underutilized as many of them are not employed after graduation and those that are employed are made to teach other subjects/courses other than French.

Araromi (2013:38)on his own part investigated the relevance of French language to Journalism Education in Nigeria. In the study, he tries to highlight the benefits that accrue to journalists with the acquisition of French language. Timothy-Asobele (1999:1-12) in the Preface of his book, *Le français au Nigéria,* looks at the status of French in the Nigerian educational system by carrying out a study on the teaching of French in Nigeria. He argues that the status has not been very encouraging. Timothy-Asobele's view is corroborated by Osazuwa (2007:95) as he attempts to bring to the notice of the readers the fact that French is not being recognized as a very important international rich language in spite of its rich history and socio-cultural endowment.

Adebayo (2007: Online) sees the teaching and learning of French language in Nigeria as being bedeviled. To him, the productivity of the language in the country is hindered by the lack of adequate encouragement from our educational policy makers that made the course a non-vocational elective at the senior secondary school level rather than making it a compulsory core subject, poor quality of the teachers of the language, non-challant attitude of many Nigerians especially the parents of students, inadequate funding of the programme by the Nigerian Government and the problem of subject combinations created by the curriculum planners. According to Osazuwa (2007:95), "… our educational system … has over the years been built on narrow curricula and programmes". French, as a programme of study, is a teaching and research discipline at the university level. 'French studies' connotes the language, its morpho-syntactic, phonological aspects, its literatures, the cultural and behavioral patterns of the owners of the language, simply put, the culture and civilization of France, among others.

Viewing French in Nigeria from an economic perspective, Owoeye (2010:68) suggested that the teaching of French in the country should be tailored towards meeting the linguistico-economic need of Nigerians. By so doing, he opines that many Nigerians would begin to value the learning of the language.

3. Challenges facing the French Studies in Nigeria

Let us hasten to mention here that the status accorded French studies in Nigerian educational system by the Ministry of Education/Educational Policy Makers has not been very satisfactory as compared with other programmes of study at the three levels of education. The mere fact that French is not made a compulsory subject at the senior secondary schools but rather a non-vocational subject points out to the fact that our educational policy-makers are short-sighted on the scope of French studies. That is enough to discourage any would-be candidates from subscribing to the programme. The lukewarm attitude of many Nigerians, especially parents, towards the learning of French also constitutes a great deal of problem to the enhancement of the programme. Many Nigerians see French as a subject or course that is not capable of rendering them economically independent, hence its learning is unprofitable. Some believe that the learning of French leads only to teaching profession. Hear what Alata (2004: Online) says: "Nothing wrong with speaking French, mind, but it is inappropriate for the socio-economic development needs of Nigerian citizens". He goes on to say that:

> If the concern is to improve commercial links with the outside world, why not promote Chinese? It is the language of the most vibrant global economy. China is already the manufacturing capital of the world. Its economy is more dynamic than most of the old Europe with which this fatuous government is so enamoured. The money Nigerians spend on importing virtually all their daily needs is very likely to end in China, even if USA, UK, France or other European countries act as financier and broker for the transaction. Why not learn Chinese and go direct.

From the foregoing, one can deduce why the French programme in the Nigerian public primary, secondary schools and the private universities are facing lots of challenges, ranging from lack of

motivation on the part of the educational policy makers/planners, lack of interest/orientation on the part of parents, dearth of adequate, qualified teachers who can effectively teach the subject at the primary and secondary school levels, lack of adequate teaching materials among others, to the very low subscription to the programme in Nigerian private universities. There is also the problem of the teachers finding it difficult to put into practice the communicative method of teaching in relation to the available teaching materials. All these challenges culminate in the present non-existence of the French programme in most Nigerian private universities. Furthermore, the very few candidates that would have ordinarily loved to enroll for French in the private universities are deterred from doing so by the high school fees; they rather prefer to go for other programmes or alternatively offer French in the public universities where the school fees are relatively lower. It is instructive to note that out of about the 50 private universities that exist in Nigeria, only about 5 offer French as a programme of study, namely: Babcock University, Ilishan-Remo, Benson Idahosa University, Benin City, Joseph Ayo Babalola University, Ikeja, Redeemers' University, Ede and Samuel Adegboyega University, Ogwa.

The case of the French programme in Covenant University is quite evolutional and requires an academic study. It is in the light of this that we shall be looking at the status of the French Studies at Covenant University and the challenges the programme has faced thus far.

4. French Studies at Covenant University: its status and challenges

B.A. French was one of the academic programmes stipulated to be run by Covenant University as contained in its maiden academic programmes handbook in 2002, the year the University was established. Between 2002 and 2009, admission into the B.A. French programme was being advertised every year through the Covenant University Scholastic Aptitude Test (CUSAT) procedures, now called the Covenant University Scholastic Aptitude Screening (CUSAS). However, subscription to the B.A. French programme was unarguably low. In the 2004/2005 Academic Session, when the programme

eventually commenced, only six candidates applied for it. In 2005/2006, two candidates applied, while in 2006/2007, there were five candidates even after the admission requirement of a credit pass at WAEC had been relaxed to accommodate candidates without prior knowledge of French. In 2007/2008 and 2008/2009 sessions, however, subscriptions rose slightly to nine and eight respectively. It was during the 2007/2008 session that the B.A. French programme, for the first time received full Accreditation from the NUC. In 2009/2010, subscription nosedived to four candidates. In 2010/2011 session, admission to the programme was stopped by the University Management. However, despite the discontinuation of the programme, the B.A. French received another full Accreditation in November 2012.

Consequently, the Department of Languages (now the Department of Languages and General Studies) set up a committee in 2010 to look at the Combined Honours previously proposed by the then Department of French, and earlier presented to the Senate of the University with a view to fine-tuning them and making them more viable and professionally attractive to candidates and parents. The committee met several times and made proposals for the introduction of programmes of French and International Relations, French and English, French and Mass Communication and French and Sociology. After several modifications, the Committee arrived at three different programmes with French as the major and each of the three others as minor. The new programmes were B.A. French (Major) with English, B.A. French (Major) with International Relations, B.A. French (Major) with Mass Communication. These programmes were packaged in such a way that French as major should take 70% of the core courses; the minor disciplines were to get 30% each respectively. Other general compulsory courses in the University were also to be offered. By this arrangement, it was expected that the products of the programmes would have acquired a high level of competence in French and enough knowledge of any of the three minors of their choice, at the end of their course.

The Department believed that the new arrangement would attract adequate subscription when advertised. The following were the points advanced then to justify the relevance and the economic viability of the programmes:

(i) French is unarguably one of the most widely spoken and written languages of the world. In addition, Nigeria is surrounded by French-speaking countries. This geographical factor makes French a relevant foreign language in Nigeria and for Nigerians. A Nigerian professional with competence in French will be at a vintage position to contribute to the economic advancement of the country in diverse sectors.

(ii) One of the 8-point agenda of the University's vision 2022 (aka1 of 10 in 10) is the internationalization of the Covenant University's academic operations. The Department felt that the presence of the academic programmes in French as an International Language would contribute to the realization of the agenda.

(iii) The study of French major with the International Relations will produce diplomats who will be able to freely interact with their host French-speaking countries without the need of an interpreter. This will stimulate better understanding of the demands of diplomacy in a globalized world.

(iv) The study of French with Mass Communication will produce mass media practitioners with a wider scope of linguistic operations. Such experts will gain an upper hand over their counterparts who operate only in English language.

(v) The study of French major with English will undoubtedly broaden the linguistic horizon of the prospective students. It is generally accepted that English and French are the most widely distributed languages of the world. A graduate of French major with English will have a very wide range of employment opportunities.

(vi) The Department has produced about twenty-five graduates of French Studies. The majority of them are now gainfully employed in various fields both locally and internationally. Some have

completed their postgraduate studies in various fields such as International Relations, Political Science, International Security, International Economics, among others. This goes to show that the French programme in Covenant University has been relatively productive.

(vii) Covenant University has invested so much on the Faculty members in the French Unit of the Department of Languages. The three members of Faculty in French have all bagged their Ph.D degrees. With three Ph.D holders, it is pertinent to note that the French programme of Covenant University is now on a very solid footing to deliver appropriately.

(viii) In November 2012, as observed earlier, the B.A. (Hons.) French was awarded full accreditation by the National Universities Commission (NUC). This was made possible because of the commitment of the four Faculty members in the French Unit of the Department at that time. It is also a function of the robustness of the existing programme.

(ix) In 2012, the University spent a huge amount for the installation of an Ultra-Modern language laboratory for the then Department of Languages. The design of the Laboratory took into account the presence of French Studies in the University. Software for the teaching and learning of French was also installed. This will facilitate the take-off of the new courses being proposed.

(x) The Department has been receiving enquiries from parents and prospective students about the Combined Honours programmes and the reactions have shown that the new programmes will be adequately subscribed to when they officially take off.

(xi) Several individuals within the University community and its environs are desirous to learn French. The Department of Languages packaged a certificate course in French to be run under the Lifelong Learning Platform. Now that all the Faculty members in French have all completed their Ph.D programme, the coast is now clear for the programme to take-off effectively.

(xii) The study of French major with other related disciplines has gained prominence in many universities in the world especially in English speaking Europe and America. Covenant University

is not a local University but one with a global vision to become one of the first best universities in the year 2022.

Based on the above points, both the Senate and the Board of Regents of the University in 2014 approved three Combined Honours programmes to be run. The approved programmes were French and English, French and International Relations and French and Strategic Studies. However, the programmes were denied approval by the National Universities Commission (NUC). The excuse by the NUC was that the products of such Combined Honours programmes have been found to be neither here nor there. It was at that point that the University suspended actions in that regard.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

We all know that it is expedient to invest heavily in education for national development; moreover, it is worthy to note that language teaching is a basic tool of national integration towards productivity and development. This study was designed to investigate the challenges facing the French Studies in Nigerian Private Universities, using Covenant University as a Case Study. The study revealed that lack of motivation on the part of the Government/Educational Planners, lack of orientation for the parents and the entire Nigerian citizenry on the importance of French to the country and dearth of qualified French teachers and teaching materials at the primary and secondary school levels have resulted in the major problem that French studies are currently facing in the private Nigerian universities – lack of subscription. The Government should set in motion, bodies to monitor the full implementation of compulsory teaching and learning of French from the primary to the senior secondary school level. Very good books and modern audio-visual materials should be made available to all public primary and secondary schools for effective teaching and learning of the language at all the three levels of education in the country. As for the private universities, plans should be put in place to make the programme more attractive to both the parents and the prospective candidates concerned. Both the Nigerian and the French

Governments should revisit and jointly look for a way to co-subsidize the one-year French immersion programme in France. That will definitely attract more candidates into the programme. Going to the Nigeria French Language Village, Badagry in Lagos can never be the same as spending a year, a full academic session in France. It will be more practical, easier and faster for the students to also learn the French culture and civilization while in France for a year than just learning it theoretically here in Nigeria. With that, parents will even be more encouraged to send their children and wards to study French in the private universities without minding the high school fees involved. Timothy-Asobele (2004:184) opines that, for the programme to be seen as a relevant course, "French must be taught as a language of culture". As regards the lack of orientation and the attendant nonchalance on the part of parents/Nigerian citizenry, the Ministry of Education and the National Universities Commission should try to create a forum whereby the general Nigerian public will be well educated and sensitized on the importance of French in Nigeria (as a country) and to Nigerians. Their minds should be disabused of the notion that French is not economically relevant. All teachers of French at the three levels of education should be made to regularly go on refresher courses, seminars, workshops and conferences in francophone countries to update themselves especially on the method of imparting both the French language and the culture.

Very importantly, the NUC should be more dynamic in its approach; it is our view that combining French with disciplines such as English, International Relations, Mass Communication and Strategic Studies is not a bad idea. We believe that Combined Honours with French as major may be the tonic needed to make the French Studies more economically viable in Nigerian Universities especially in the private ones.

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