



The Indigenization of Foreign Language Teaching in Nigeria: Myth or Reality?

Essoh, Ndobu Eugenie Grace, Endong Floribert Patrick Calvin

Abstract – The indigenization paradigm is, today, driving sensitive sectors of the Nigerian economy, including education. Generally viewed by culturalists as a strategy aimed at cultural protectionism, it has somehow been envisaged in foreign language (FL) teaching in the country. A good manifestation of this move is viewed in French language teaching which, visibly, is more Afro-centric (in nature), especially at primary and secondary levels of education. In effect, the teaching of French is generally more afro-centric than Euro-centric (Franco-centric). It is aimed primordially at enabling the integration of Nigerians with *Francophones* from African countries. Moreover, it is driven by afro-centric methods such as *On y va* among others. However, the Afro-centric nature of foreign language teaching in Nigeria raises a number of questions pertaining to the relationship between foreign languages and western cultural imperialism. This paper explores the interface of foreign language teaching and indigenous cultures as well as the challenges of the indigenization model of foreign language teaching in Nigeria. It attempts to show how foreign language teaching is a vector of cultural imperialism in Nigeria and further seeks to answer two questions: is indigenization really possible in foreign language teaching? And what factors may be challenges to such a laudable cultural policy in language teaching?

Keywords— Indigenization, Foreign Language Teaching, Cultural Imperialism

I. INTRODUCTION

Like most of her African counterparts, Nigeria has adopted the indigenization model as a strategic instrument and a practical paradigm to resist cultural imperialism and preserve her cultures. This move is very perceptible in a number of sensitive sectors of the Nigerian Federation including the petroleum, tourism, banking, media and education sectors [1-7]. It has abundantly been argued that education – as one of the strongest state apparatuses – has been among the principal vectors of westernization (cultural imperialism) in Nigeria.

Since the colonial period, education in Nigeria –as in most African nations – has been serving the course of the importation, selling and firm implantation of western (especially British and American) cultures [2, 8-12]. Salawu denounces this dolorous experience when he notes that the persistently preferential status granted to the colonial (European) language and education in most African countries is a monumental impediment to the cultural development of most African states including contemporary Nigeria. He passionately posits that:

The structure that the colonialists handed down still remains till today, decades after they have left. In fact, it is even more strengthened as English (for instance) and Western educations continue to remain the language and education of power and progress in life. Therefore, there is an understandable fast growing interest in both the language and the education. Africa remains far from catching up with the pace of human progress in the advanced world. Therefore Africa continues to look up to the West. This aspiration is captured in the concept of *empathy* [...] and revolution rising expectation. Needless to say that the paradigm of development (modernization) in which the concepts are enunciated has since been flawed [9, pp.9-10].

In the same line of argument, Maduka concedes that European languages (English, French and Portuguese) are today perceived by Nigerians as “languages of civilization” [12, pp.14]. Accordingly, Nigeria is no longer considered a *multilingual* country but a *bilingual* one. All these, according to Maduka, give the impression that, “ for all intents and purposes, Nigerian [indigenous] languages are now considered dead or at best viewed as objects of study for archival purpose. The clouds are thickening; unless drastic steps are taken to reverse the situation, very soon Nigerian languages and literatures will disappear from the cultural map of the world ” [12, pp.14]. The imposition of foreign language and system of education are therefore two cardinal vectors of western imperialism.

To reverse the situation, a number of African culturalists, educationist and policy makers with a pride for African cultures have recommended the indigenization of education. In Nigeria, indigenization in the educational sector is viewed in the move toward teaching in/of indigenous languages and

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the inclusion of such subjects/topics as African oral literature in school programs among others [3, 12, pp12; 13, pp.61; 14, pp.9]. In line with this, the Nigerian National Policy on Education stipulates that national languages such as Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba should be taught at early stages of primary education.

Government appreciates the importance of language as a means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion; and preserving cultures. Thus every child shall learn the language of the immediate environment. Furthermore, in the interest of national unity it is expedient that every child shall be required to learn one of the three Nigerian languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba [14, pp.9].

The indigenization model is also theoretically envisaged in foreign language teaching. It is highly recommended and upheld to a considerable extent in Nigerian primary, secondary and even some tertiary school institutions. A good manifestation of this move toward indigenizing foreign language teaching is the Afro-centric nature of the French language programs in primary and secondary levels of education. In effect, the teaching of French is generally more afro-centric than Euro-centric (Franco-centric). It is aimed primordially at enabling Nigerians' integration with African *Francophones* (French speaking people). The National Policy on education clearly mentions this pan-africanist ideal as one of the principal objectives of such a teaching when it declares that "for smooth interaction with our neighbors, it is desirable for every Nigerian to speak French. Accordingly, French shall be the second official language in Nigeria, and it shall be compulsory in schools" [14, pp.9]. Another manifestation of the indigenization of French language teaching is the adoption and popularization by French language educators of such afro-centric French language methods like *On y va!* [2, 15-18]. However, it should be noted that, though *On y va* (the Afro-centric French method) has officially been recommended for French language teaching in secondary schools, numerous French language educators continue to use methods that are too foreign such *Tempo, Libre-échange, De Vive-voix* and the like [19].

The Afro-centric nature of foreign language teaching in Nigeria raises a number of questions pertaining to the relationship between foreign language and western cultural imperialism. This paper explores the interface of foreign language teaching and indigenous cultures as well as the challenges of the indigenization model of foreign language teaching in Nigeria. It attempts to show how foreign language teaching is a vector of cultural imperialism in Nigeria and further seeks to answer two questions: is indigenization really possible in foreign language teaching? And what factors can be challenges to such a laudable cultural policy in language teaching?

II. FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND WESTERN CULTURE IMPERIALISM

Language is naturally considered a social phenomenon and a carrier of culture. As Wesche succinctly puts it, "languages are the most comprehensive reflections of the complex cultures of the societies with which we share the planet" [20]. They are the principal means of "generating, maintaining and transferring of culture and civilization" [21]. The two phenomena (language and culture) are inextricably linked, so much so that (foreign or indigenous) language teaching/learning entails subtle or glaring enculturation/acculturation [22-25]. As Williams insightfully contends, the learning of foreign languages involves far more than simple learning skills, or mastery of systems of rules or grammar. Such an experience involves a subtle "alteration in self-image, the adoption of new social and cultural behaviors and ways of being, and therefore has a significant impact on the social nature of the learner" [34, pp.77]. In the same line of argument, Wesche contends that foreign language learning requires being open to other cultures, the cultures of countries sharing the learned foreign language [20]. Pritikin observes that foreign language teaching can be equated to cultural education.

Many FL [Foreign language] educators feel very strongly that it is this role as cultural educators, that are at the very heart of what they do: expose students to culture through its most important medium-language. They believe that the heightening of cross-cultural awareness and understanding ought to be an intentional design of FL instruction, not merely a by-product of communicative competence [23].

A good number of African scholars, traditionalists and anthropologists view western languages (English, French, Spanish, Portuguese and the like) as main carriers of the western hegemonic culture [8-9, 19]. Linguists and culturalists have thus equated their teaching and expansion in the Nigerian socio-linguistic ecology to a threat to the survival of indigenous languages [2, 8, 26]. Mokwenye corroborates this view when he asserts that: "many Nigerians have a negative attitude towards foreign languages as a whole, as they see them as threat to the teaching and learning of Nigerian languages" [27, pp.124]. Indeed, foreign language teaching/learning has its own contribution to the progressive westernization of Nigerians. This teaching continues or complements a formidable and complex socialization process commenced by other ideological state apparatuses, including religion, the media and the educational system.

Through their respective cultural cooperation in Nigeria, a number of western nations intensify this westernization process and cultural imperialism by encouraging euro-centric approaches in the teaching and promotion of their languages. The French cultural cooperation for instance, aptly illustrates this tendency. Through it *Alliances Française*, and other

cultural bodies it supports a French language teaching programs based on the utilization of purely Franco-centric methods such as *Echo*. These methods are profoundly inspired by French socio-cultural values and visibly seek to progressively and subtly acculturate Nigerian learners. The *Alliances Françaises* systematically anchored their teaching on the slogan “Learn French in the French way” which entails a profound acculturation of Nigerians in the learning process [2]. They also organize international language proficiency exams (DELF and DALF) which require candidates to be grounded in the French culture. Most western countries therefore use the promotion of their language as an instrument of cultural domination. All these visibly constitute a contradiction to the move by Nigeria to indigenize foreign language teaching in General and French language teaching in particular.

III. IS INDIGENIZATION OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING REALLY POSSIBLE?

For some decades now, there is a manifest will from policy makers and foreign language educators to indigenize foreign languages teaching in Nigeria. Policy makers have pointedly expressed the need to adapt foreign language teaching to the Nigerian environment in view of creating authentic learning opportunities for Nigerian learners [17-19]. The National curriculum for the teaching of French language, for instance, clearly articulates this indigenization philosophy in its enunciation of the objectives of French language teaching in Nigeria.

Its aims is also to widen the scope of the learner’s knowledge about the French and the French speaking community [and] seek to be a synthesis of past Nigeria syllabuses as well as those of other countries and benefits from the experience of the past in order to fit into the present modern Nigerian context [28].

The adaptation consists of fashioning foreign language teaching according to native characteristic (native/indigenous cultural values). It entails infiltrating local customs and other cultural values into pedagogic practices to make teaching fit the Nigerian environment [2, 18, 29-30]. It thus involves the inclusion in foreign language programs, methods and manuals of such features of locality as indigenous names, local food and trees, indigenous mode of transport, dressing style and the like.

Quoting David, the two foreign language educationists Okom and Gogura present a two-sided critique of the indigenization philosophy in foreign language [19, pp.138]. They challenge proponents of the indigenization philosophy to bear in mind that, though such a creative and original paradigm might give room to authentic tasks and performance with learners, it may, on the other hand, constitute an artificial and non-pragmatic/unrealistic teaching method. In a somehow derogatory tone, they succinctly contend that:

A leopard with different spots is still a leopard [...] a mediocre European course book does not become a good African one simply by talking of mangoes as opposed to apples or showing a palm tree or crocodile on its glossy cover. Perhaps the device of authors [foreign language pedagogues] making use of Nigerian characters making them speak foreign languages better may be artificial. [19, pp.138]

In effect, the teaching of western cultures is almost inevitable in a foreign language teaching context. As Lessard-Clouston succinctly argues, “it is the recognition of an ‘unbreakable bond’ between language and culture that motivates our profession’s implicit commandment that ‘thou shall not teach language without also teaching [foreign (western)] culture’”[31, pp.134]. In line with this, a number of foreign language pedagogues have attempted to explicate the inevitability of foreign culture teaching in FL didactics [20, pp.34; 23, pp.14; 32; 13, pp.177; 34, pp.55]. Their explanations can be summarized in the six following observations:

- Language acquisition by learners differs with respect to cultures. It never follows a universal sequence.
- Linguistic competence in society is realized through exchanges of language in particular social situations.
- Language educators’ primary concern is rarely, nay never with grammatical input, but with the transmission of socio-cultural knowledge.
- In addition to language, the native learner acquires the paralinguistic patterns and the kinetics of his or her culture.
- Linguistic codes cannot be outside the socio-cultural context. The processes of socio-cultural transmission are bound to be at work at many levels, for instance, the contents of language exercises, the cultural discourse of textbooks, and the teacher’s attitudes towards the target culture.
- In their role of "secondary care givers" language educators need to go beyond mere monitoring of students’ linguistic production. They equally need become aware of the complex and numerous processes of intercultural mediation that any foreign language learner undergoes.

In line with these observations, it may be argued that foreign (European) language teaching is inextricably linked to western cultural teaching. This cultural teaching may in turn involve acculturation. With this, it may further be argued that foreign culture teaching (through FL teaching) is a challenge to the indigenization philosophy. Though it contributes to the progressive and subtle westernization of foreign language learners (thus cultural imperialism), such an acculturation is viewed by many educators as necessary for cross-cultural education and linguistic training in an era which is literally governed by the (somehow indomitable) forces of globalization. According to the globalist school of thought,

foreign language teaching ought to be articulated on the heightening of cross-cultural awareness and understanding. Pritikin observes that:

In order to communicate meaningfully with speakers of another language, students of the FL [foreign languages] need to be able to understand what speakers of that language know about or understand about different cultures and how they will react to events that involve different cultures. Being open to others ('otherness') requires distancing oneself from one's own cultural assumptions and seeing oneself as also possessing a learned culture [...] these ways of knowing and being can be nurtured in the early stages of language learning and it is essential that we nurture them in the language class room. [23, pp.14]

In the same line of argument, Mokwenye notes that "we cannot, as Nigerians, shy away from globalization and the role foreign languages and culture education can play in our exposure to science and technology, trade, tourism, research and world politics" [27, pp.124]. For Nigeria and Nigerians to be part of the globalizing world, it would be imperative to accord an important place to the acquisition of foreign languages and a fostering of this cross-cultural awareness and understanding. With this, indigenization of foreign language teaching may be considered not really compatible with today's globalizing world.

IV. YET, INDIGSNIZATION IS NECESSARY

Though very difficult to be perfectly upheld at all levels of foreign language teaching, the indigenization paradigm remains a pertinent philosophy to a good number of African language educators and policy makers. There is no gain saying that it represents a serious attempt to resist westernization (cultural imperialism) and preserve Nigerian cultures. As Salawu pointedly observes, it will be unpatriotic and a lack of cultural pride for Nigerians to equate localization (indigenization) to crudity and to consider it a retrograde, antithetical and antagonistic to globalization [10, pp.2].

It may be more practical to revise its conception with respect to teaching foreign languages in Nigeria. It is undoubtedly impossible to totally eliminate cultural activities that expose learners to the socio-cultural values of European/western nations. However, it is possible and commendable to rework or redesign contents of foreign language programmes to dominantly make them afro-centric. Afro-centrism here would involve basing the FL teaching more on the African socio-cultural context and exposing learners more to African cultures (for instance through African literature and arts) than to western cultures. This may be very strategic and fruitful as there exist a strong affinity between African cultures [2, 35-36]. This is in line with Essoh and Endong's view that:

The indigenization philosophy [should] be applied at all levels of French language teaching in Nigeria. Indigenization here will not mean a total exclusion of topics or courses exclusively devoted to the French civilization in the different university programmes or primary and secondary school syllabuses. Just as the country was able to define the foreign content tolerable (limited to 40%) in the local media production, they should also be measures to concretely and objectively define the amount of French culture related topics or courses. Preference should be given to the francophone African culture in the distribution of courses in a French teaching program. [2, pp.155]

Indigenization is a salutary way for the protection of Nigerian cultures. Though virtually impossible to perfectly be upheld in the teaching of foreign languages, it should be allowed to guide FL teaching to a reasonable extent. Nigeria the same as her African counterparts should continue the eternal struggle against the total erosion of indigenous culture. Indigenization may serve as a solid weapon in this culturalist effort.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued in defense of the indigenization paradigm in the education sector in general and FL teaching in particular. The paper praised efforts towards envisaging the indigenization of foreign language. It argued that such a policy may be a vector of cultural protectionism which is necessary for the cultural development of the Nigerian nation. This paper equally explores the interface of foreign language teaching and indigenous cultures as well as some challenges to the indigenization model of foreign language teaching in Nigeria. It presented foreign language teaching as a vector of cultural imperialism in Nigeria and further sought to show the extent to which indigenization is really possible in foreign language teaching.

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Music: Aesthetic Feature or Archetype of a Pentecostal Identity?
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