

The Development of Chinese Language in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study explored the development of Chinese language in Nigeria as a tool for national development and economic integration. It is also aimed at examining the level of success recorded in teaching and learning of Chinese language in Nigeria. The study identified several challenges militating against effective teaching and learning of the language. However, the study found out that, to a large extent the knowledge of Chinese language among Nigerians would improve the economic integration and national development of the country. Also, it is discovered that the level of Chinese language usage in Nigeria is not adequate. Based on these findings, the following recommendations were made; that government should employ avenues of promoting the teaching and learning of Chinese language in Nigeria and secondly, more awareness should be made on the need for young people to embrace the learning of Chinese language to increase socio-economic tie. While the needed learning materials and incentive should be made available, Nigeria should open more centers of Confucius institute, in order to facilitate the expansion and development of Chinese language in Nigeria.

Introduction

Unarguably, language is an integral part of man. It is obviously a vital tool, not only as a means of communicating thought and ideas, but it forges friendship, cultural ties, and economic relationships. According to Benjamin Whorf, he noted that, “language shapes thoughts and emotions, determining one’s perception of reality”. For the linguist Edward Sapir, language is not only a vehicle for the expression of thoughts, perceptions, sentiments, and values characteristic of a community; it also represents a fundamental expression of social identity. Sapir said: “the mere fact of a common speech serves as a peculiar potent symbol of the social solidarity of those who speak the language.” In short, language retention helps maintain feelings of cultural kinship.

Accordingly, the relevance of the learning and teaching of Chinese language in some Nigerian educational institutions cannot be over emphasized. In an advancing global world with increasing interdependence, knowledge of other languages becomes indispensable. In view of this, Jiang admitted that learning Chinese language in Nigerian schools has become necessary because it has become a new destination for economic growth and technological development. He maintains that “the knowledge of Chinese language will help students further their studies in China and carry out research in various fields of human endeavour as China has become a success story in the world economy”.

The bilateral relation between the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the People’s Republic of China has expanded trade and strategic economic cooperation between the two countries. China is considered as one of Nigeria’s closest allies and partners. China is also one of Nigeria’s important trading and export partners. According to a 2014 BBC world service poll, 85% of Nigerians view China’s influence positively, with only 10% expressing a negative view, making Nigeria the most pro-Chinese nation in the world.

However, Nigeria and the People’s Republic of China established formal diplomatic relation on February 10, 1971. Relation between the two nations grew stronger as a result of international isolation and western condemnation of Nigeria’s military regime (1970-1998). Nigeria has since become an important source of oil and petroleum for China’s rapidly expanding economy and Nigeria is looking to China for help in achieving high economic growth; China has provided extensive economic, military and political support to Nigeria. In 2004 and again in 2006, Chinese president Hu Jintao made state visits to Nigeria and addressed a joint session of the National Assembly of Nigeria. Both nations signed memorandum of understanding on establishing a strategic partnership.

Another strategic cooperation between Nigeria and China was witnessed during the Niger Delta crisis when United States and other western nations were reluctant to support in providing military aid in fighting insurgent in the oil-rich Niger Delta to protect Nigeria’s oil resources. In their usual cooperation, China supplied arms, equipments, training and technology to the Nigerian armed forces. Both nations also signed 311 million USD agreement to develop cooperation in communication satellite (Nigeria comsat-1) in 2007 to expand cellular and internet networks.

In the area of commerce, Nigeria-China bilateral trade has risen to about 10 billion USD in 2015 up from 6 billion USD in 2012. Both nations agreed to a four plan to improve bilateral relations- a key component of which was to expand trade and investments in agriculture, telecommunication, and energy and infrastructure development. Consequently from 2000 to 2011, there was approximately 40 Chinese official development finance projects identified in Nigeria through various media reports. It is obvious that China has certainly been contributing to Nigeria's socio-economic and military development, both in terms of trade and infrastructure, hence partners in our national development. Therefore, the knowledge of Chinese language will serve as a viable tool in driving our economic integration and national development.

As Nigeria-China socioeconomic relations deepens, the fundamental issue borders on the language barrier, as no meaningful social or business interaction can thrive in such a wide language gap. Accordingly, a number of economic constraints can arise in international trade if there is a lack of foreign language competency among people. Such issues include; misunderstanding of contracts, inability to grasp foreign economic policies and the general difference in language when it comes to business terms being translated. Similarly, the issue of inadequate manpower in the teaching of Chinese language is also a problem militating against the rapid and effective learning of the language in Nigeria. In the same vein insufficient learning centers and teaching materials are no doubt part of the militating factors. Again, the environmental challenge facing the learners of Chinese language hinders the rapid learning of the language. This is in view of the fact that one can only learn a language by speaking it with people around him, but this is difficult in most cases where virtually everyone around cannot speak nor understand the language. It limits the learning to only a classroom exercise.

The Nature and Scope of Chinese Language Integration in Nigeria

Indeed, the nature and scope of any bilingual society varies depending on the languages that are involved. According to the *International Conference on Language* (2014) the nature of the second language acquisition and language planning, have experienced the most intense research investment in history. This has produced wealth of insights into language abilities and how they are produced and sustained. From the brain to society, from the home to the school, from conversation to teaching, from identity to testing, all areas of human knowledge about language ability are transformed. They noted that, bilingual skills affect cognitive functioning, learning and social relationships. Brain research has opened up remarkable insight showing the protective effects of bilingualism against some degenerative illness in old age extending the knowledge that early bilingualism can foster positive intellectual development in infants and small children.

As China grows its economic influence around the world, the expansion and spread of its language becomes pertinent. Since, China has become the world's largest economy, and recently began an aggressive economic invasion of Africa, offering to build most of the continent infrastructure backed by loans. Hence, the learning of Chinese language in Nigeria is necessary because China has become the new destination for economic growth and technological development. According to Oladunjoye in Aboderin (2012) "The knowledge of Chinese language will help students further their studies in China and carry out research in various human endeavour as China has become a success story in the world economy." However, Lagos State is the first Nigerian state to adopt the Chinese language as a curriculum in public schools, with few other tertiary institutions where the Confucius institutes are currently located.

In the same vein, while China's dramatic economic and trade impact on Nigeria and Africa at large has caught global attention, it has further strengthened cultural exchange between Nigeria and China. Unarguably, culture and language are siamese twins. They go together. Proper understanding of a particular language cannot be achieved without understanding the cultural background of the native speakers. In view of this, Onanuga as in Aboderin (2012) noted that, "as much as the Chinese language invades the Nigerian territory, the Chinese culture is bound to be imbibed as well." He maintains that the culture of a people represent almost everything about them- their history, way of life, belief system, literature, art, customs, music, social organization, traditions and so on. Language cultural integration entails what makes any particular community a total and unique group, when it is not observed or jettisoned, the people frown or react to show their objection. It should however be noted that culture can sometimes be dynamic. All the same, some salient, core aspects of culture remain immutable. In the view of the Chairman, Fafunwa Education Foundation, Mr. Kayode Alao in Aboderin (2012), he noted that, "those who are objecting the introduction and expansion of Chinese language in Nigeria don't have a global mind; probably they think language will affect our culture, but it can't". He maintained that it is high time we started broadening our reasoning. For instance, schools in Europe have more languages to offer. This goes to show that who want to thrive ahead must think global and urbane in their thought. China is now the most-leading economy and it would be for our good if we learn their language."

However, despite the obstacles and the associated potential risk of Chinese language integration in Nigeria, the partnerships can play an important role in fostering the growth and development of Nigerian economy. According to Jianke Gao, WeSizwe Platinum's CEO,

“Sino-African partnerships have the potential to play an important role in fostering the future growth and development of African economies. Economic diversification based on high competitiveness, supported by specialist expertise, skills and technology transfer would be the main catalyst of China's contribution to Africa's economic transformation in the global marketplace”.

Thus, building bridges through language integration with Nigerians by promoting their presence in China could be an opportunity for Nigerians to extend their activities towards new markets. As political and economic governance are as important to Nigeria as they are for China in fostering inclusiveness. The synergies that may be created from collaboration in these could benefit both countries as the world is steadily moving toward a more inclusive approach of economic development.

The Effect of the Expansion of Chinese Influence in Nigeria

As the booming Nigeria-China relationship deepens, China's presence in Nigeria with all the associating economic and socio-cultural ties are not without some implication. Unarguably, with China's swift rise to prominence on the global stage, the need for the spread of Chinese language otherwise known as Mandarin deepens. In this regard, the introduction of Chinese language in Nigeria was received with mixed feelings, as some educationists opposed the idea; on the grounds that, it is a misplaced idea to introduce Mandarin when most pupils in Nigerian schools could hardly speak their indigenous languages, maintaining that such policy will be detrimental to our indigenous languages. In support of this view, Onanuga in Aboderin (2012) noted that, “there is everything wrong with any linguistic community that promotes some other foreign languages at the detriment of its own mother tongue. This is exactly the situation in most States in Nigeria today.”

In a separate reaction, an educationist, Elijah Okupevi in Aboderin (2012) noted in reaction to the introduction of Chinese as part of curriculum in Lagos State schools that, “the Chinese are like locusts that leave anywhere they ever visited devastated. The aftermath of the British colonization of Africa left Africa the weaker party of the two continents with West pillaging our resources at will. The imposition of Chinese language and culture will leave us the behest of China's economic poison. He maintained that our government should be very careful not to sell us again into economic slavery in the name of acculturation. The West you know is better than the Chinese you don't know.” In the same vein, another educationist, Ms. Bukoye Arowolo in Aboderin (2012), noted that, as good as the idea of learning foreign languages is, it is not supposed to be the starting point. “Otherwise we shall continue to produce future leaders who are incapable of thinking. The starting point should be the acquisition of mother-tongue to enable the child think instead of confusing his cognitive faculty with languages at an age he/she is just getting used to his/her first language. We are yet to solve the problem created by wrong and untimely exposure of our children to some kind of English language. Why must we continue to complicate matters for future for cheap political points?” she added.

Also, in economic aspect, the risk of a Chinese economic slowdown would unavoidably affect Nigeria considering the deep economic cooperation existing between them. According to AFDB (2001) Africa has benefited from the Chinese economic boom through increased trade and investment, mainly in natural resource sector. Thus Africa is particularly vulnerable to economic shocks hitting the Chinese economy. However, recent estimates by the IMF indicates that China's GDP growth is projected to slow to 8.2% and 8.8% in 2012 and 2013, respectively from an average of more than 9% over the past three decades. Since China's economic ties with Nigeria and Africa at large are mainly resource based, a fall in China's demand for Africa's commodities could create tensions in the current account and fiscal positions of these countries. Accordingly, lower growth in China could also result in contraction of credit lines from major Chinese banks to Africa. In recent years, Chinese banks have funded infrastructure projects in Nigeria and Africa at large. Similarly, a growing number of small-scale Chinese private firms are making business in Nigeria and Africa at large without the direct endorsement by Chinese government. Growth in Chinese private investment in sectors outside traditional natural resources has however fuelled resentment among local investors and the people. At a recent World Bank organized conference, China was identified as the biggest land grabber in the world and in Africa. Chinese companies have also been accused of unfair competition without forging strong links with local firms.

Despite the obstacles and the associated potential risk of China's engagement with Nigeria, China-Nigeria relationship can play an important role in fostering growth and development of Nigerian economies. However, economic diversification based on high competitiveness through skills and technology transfer would be the main catalyst of China's contribution to Nigeria's transformation. Therefore, building bridges with Chinese firms by promoting their presence in Nigeria could be an opportunity for Nigeria to extend their activities towards new markets and fostering inclusiveness. Meanwhile, there cannot be this mutual integration between Nigeria and China relationship without effective language integration. Any policy aimed at diversifying the future financing of Nigeria economic growth by flow of foreign investment must consider the language integration. Hence, the development of Chinese language in Nigeria should be encouraged by all concern, as it goes a long way in fostering the socio-economic and cultural ties.

The Historical Development of Chinese Language in Nigeria

The Chinese people have a long history of migrating overseas. However, the history of Chinese migrants in Nigeria dates back to 1930 colonial Nigeria's census, which showed four Chinese people living in Nigeria. By 1965 there were about 200 Chinese people in the country. By 1999, that number had grown to 5,800, including 630 from Taiwan and 1,050 from Hong Kong. However, the West Africa United Business Weekly, believed to be the first Chinese language newspaper in West Africa, was established in 2005. China's official People's Daily also sought to form a partnership with Nigerian national newspaper *This Day* in 2006 (People's Daily, 2010). This period no doubt marked the origin of Chinese language in Nigeria followed by subsequent establishment of Confucius Institutes.

The establishment of Confucius institute in Nigeria

As China's global influence increases, more and more Nigerians are taking up Chinese language classes. The establishment of Confucius Institute is aimed at satisfying the need of Nigerian people to learn Chinese language, improve the understanding of Chinese language and culture, strengthen Sino-Nigeria exchanges and cooperation of education and culture, develop the friendship between two countries and promote the development of multi-culture in the world together.

Mandarin Chinese is another foreign language currently developing in Nigeria and it might be one of the country's new Lingua Franca in the future. And one thing explains this new love for mandarin, the economic prosperity of China. According to Babatunde Fashola, the former Lagos State governor, during the celebration of his 2000 days in office, he noted that, "whether we admit it or not, the Chinese are taking over the global economy and we are only preparing our pupils for the opportunities that the use of Chinese language as the possible language of the future might provide". The partnership of Nigerian government and its institutions with China on the study of mandarin and the spread of the language is a noble one. Novelty demands that this relationship remain mutual.

In the light of the above, the first Nigerian Confucius Institute was established in Nnamdi Azikiwe University in 2008 and subsequently in University of Lagos in 2009. The Confucius institute at Nnamdi Azikiwe University is the first Confucius Institute in Nigeria. The university has long shown a close interest in Chinese language and culture. The university held a Chinese cultural festival in 2005. In November 2007, the then vice-chancellor, professor Ilochi Okafor (SAN) visited Xiamen university china and signed an agreement for the co-establishment of a Confucius institute. The agreement establishing the institute was prepared by the Office of Chinese Language Council International (HANBAN). The Confucius Institute at University of Lagos is established by University of Lagos (UNILAG), Nigeria and Beijing Institute of Technology (BIT), China. The two parties signed contract on October 9, 2008, opened the first class on May 25, 2009 and unveiled the CI on October 16, 2009. Other programmes provided by both institutes are the holding of HSK examination (Chinese proficiency test) and tests for the certification of Chinese language teachers, providing information and consultative services concerning Chinese education, culture, and so forth, conducting language and cultural exchange activities between China and Nigeria.

The Benefits of Chinese Language in Nigeria

One of the ways Nigerians can irrefutably benefit from interaction with China is to learn Chinese language and facilitate dialogue with the Chinese fluently by the exchange of students between China and Nigeria. China will increase the number of government scholarships as it sees fit. The Chinese will continue to send teachers to help Nigeria in Chinese language teaching and carry out educational assistance projects to help develop Nigeria's weak disciplines. These disciplines are medicine, science, health, and media. It intends to strengthen cooperation in such fields as vocational education and distance learning while encouraging exchanges and cooperation between educational and academic institutions of both sides (China's Africa Policy, 2006). The role the Chinese people are currently playing in the development of Africa upholds that the Chinese language be taught in Nigerian schools and

universities as a component of a Nigerian's syllabus. African States should definitely prioritize the Chinese language due to a number of reasons. First and foremost, the Chinese currently extract most of their raw materials from Nigeria. A survey of China-Nigeria immersion indicates that the presence of China in the swamplands of the Niger Delta is where night and day oil rigs produce oil. As these assets get exploited, there must be an intrinsic need for communication and understanding and a clear comprehension of each other, with or without interpreters. Second, with Nigerians learning the language and understanding the Chinese culture, this in turn will enable Nigeria to get better contracts from their trade and related negotiations with China. Bilateral cultural exchange in diverse forms between people's organizations and institutions are relevant in cultural cooperation (China's Africa Policy, 2006). Katherine Tweedie, Head of Africa at World Economic Forum, articulated, "The advice better given to many African students at the universities now is to learn the Chinese language because relations are bound to get stronger".

Consequently, by enhancing an understanding of the Chinese culture and language, Nigeria-China relations will be more productive. There will be a resulting development of mutual relations in culture and trade between the two countries, portraying a growing Chinese middle class in Nigeria. Chinese Africanist Wong, History Professor at Ecole Internationale de Genève (EIG), confirmed that "one of the best ways Africans can benefit from interaction with China is for Africans, especially Nigerians, to learn and study the Chinese language proficiently". The role that China is currently playing signifies that it is essential for the Chinese language to be taught in Nigeria schools and universities. As China currently mines most of its raw materials from the Niger Delta, it is implicit that there is a sense of urgency for both parties to relate directly with one another. In short, by learning the Chinese language, this serves as a medium through which Nigerians will be able to develop their skill and expertise in whatever pursuits they set out to accomplish. Presently, Nigeria is inadequately equipped to do this, with the only Chinese language programs in the country currently at Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka and University of Lagos Nigeria.

The formation of Confucius Institutes in Nigeria, and training of Nigerian professionals in various professions by China, is very important for these trainees, as they might become the future entrepreneurs, managers, engineers, doctors and even policy makers in Africa. In international studies, the importance of scholars and professionals who train in other countries cannot be underestimated in terms of transfer of cultures, language, practices and technologies from host country to their own nations. China's aim is to use this as a strategy to enhance the growth and consolidation of its soft power (the ability to gain support by cultural and political influence—while Western powers are finding it ever harder to push their ideology that egalitarianism is the only valid system of government) in the growing global economy (Mohan, et al, 2009). Besides the annual scholarships from Chinese government and Confucius institute to Nigerian students to study in China, the introduction of Chinese language in Nigeria has equally benefited Nigerian people and economy.

The Challenges Facing Chinese Language in Nigeria

Chinese language is said to be the hardest language in the world. This may be because of the difference in the phonology of Chinese language and other alphabetic languages. Chinese language is a logographic and tonal language which makes it hard to speak and write. The Chinese language belongs to a separate branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family. It is a contour tone language. It has many dialect groups. They include Mandarin, Wu, Min, Cantonese, Hsiang, and Hakka. The use of pinyin in the study of Chinese provides many practical advantages for learning the language. Nevertheless, learners still encounter all sorts of problems in the course of learning the language. However, most of the phonological problems which Nigerian students are facing in learning the Chinese language stem from the presence of certain speech sounds in the language that are not in the Nigerian learners' indigenous languages. Chinese characters represent monosyllables, and generally each character represents a single morpheme. The total number of Chinese characters is estimated at over fifty thousand, of which only five to eight thousand are normally adequate for everyday situations.

In addition, the issue of inadequate manpower in the teaching of Chinese language is also a militating factor against the rapid and effective learning of the language in Nigeria. In the same vein insufficient learning centers and teaching materials are no doubt part of the militating factors. Nigeria currently has only two Confucius institutes, which is not enough for a rapid development of the language in Nigeria. Again, the environmental challenge facing the learners of Chinese language hinders the rapid learning of the language. This is in view of the fact that one can only learn a language by speaking it with people around him, but this difficult in most cases where virtually everyone around cannot speak nor understand the language. It limits the learning to only a classroom exercise.

Conclusion

It is unarguable that the expansion of Chinese language and cultural integration in Nigeria will further increase the economic integration and national development in Nigeria. This study found out that the level of Chinese language usage in Nigeria is still inadequate, as a result of the issue of inadequate manpower in the teaching of Chinese language is also a militating factor against the rapid and effective learning of the language in Nigeria. In the same vein insufficient learning centers and teaching materials are no doubt part of the militating factors. Nigeria currently has only two Confucius institutes, which is not enough for a rapid development of the language in Nigeria. Again, the environmental challenge facing the learners of Chinese language hinders the rapid learning of the language. This is in view of the fact that one can only learn a language by speaking it with people around him, but this is difficult in most cases where virtually everyone around cannot speak nor understand the language. It limits the learning to only a classroom exercise. However, these entire factors posed great challenge to the learning Chinese language in Nigeria.

Recommendations

1. Nigeria must continue to build, maintain and embrace a mutually trusting and respectful alliance with China. The partnership will continue to pave the way for structural engagements to the greatest extent between the two countries.
2. Nigeria should open more centers of Confucius institute, in order to facilitate the expansion and development of Chinese language in Nigeria.
3. More awareness should be made on the need for young people to embrace the learning of Chinese language to increase socio-economic tie. While the needed learning materials and incentive should be made available.

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