

Arabic as a Foreign Language in the Nigerian Higher Education Curriculum: Problems, Solutions and Prospects

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Abstract

The study is concerned with the problem of how to improve the teaching of Arabic as a foreign language in Nigerian Higher Education System. The paper traces the historical background of Arabic education in Nigeria and also outlines the problems facing the language in Nigerian Institutions. It lays down some of the essential foundation-work necessary for bringing about systematic and constructive improvements in the Teaching of Arabic as a Foreign Language (TAFL) by giving answers to the following research questions: what is the appropriate medium of instruction in teaching a foreign or second language? What is the position of English language in the teaching and learning of Arabic/Islamic education? What is the relevance of the present curriculum of Arabic /Islamic education in Nigerian institutions to the contemporary society? A survey of the literature indicates that a revolution is currently taking place in FL teaching and that a new approach known as the Communicative Approach (CA), has begun to emerge and influence the teaching of FLs in general, over the last decade or so. Since the CA is currently being adopted to the teaching of most major FLs and since this revolution has not yet had much impact on TAPL, the study explores the possibility of the application of the CA to the teaching of Arabic as a living language and also makes recommendations towards the development of the language in Nigerian Institutions of Higher Learning.

Keywords: Arabic Language, Nigerian Institutions, Curriculum, Communicative Approach

Introduction

The Arabic language is the second language of every non- Arab Muslim, being the language supposedly acquired next to his mother tongue through the study of the Arabic Quran and later through other branches of Arabic and Islamic studies. In Nigerian context, Arabic is closely attached to all the Islamic knowledge disciplines within the Arabic school system. Therefore, the close relationship between Arabic and Islamic studies puts the language at the disposal of students learning it in this environment. And it is against this background that Muslims in Nigeria are committed to the course of Arabic and Islamic studies. Wherever there is a Muslim population, some kinds of Quranic and Advanced Arabic schools are established in which both Arabic and Islamic studies are studied simultaneously (Fafunwa, 1974).

Moreover, the early Arabic/Islamic education facilitated the first formal system of education in Nigeria. Many of the graduates from this early Islamic education furthered their studies in some of the ancient Islamic centers that later became some of the oldest Universities in the world (Fafunwa 1974). Among these early Islamic Universities are; the Qayrawan University in Fez, Morocco, the great al-Azhar University, Cairo established by the Fatimids of Egypt, Timbuktu also enjoyed the full accreditation of the scholars as the centre of Arabic and Islamic education in West Africa so also is the University of Az-zaytuni in Tunisia. In all these institutions, Arabic was the language of research, teaching and communication.

More so, these centres produced many of the early Muslim scholars in Nigeria and Africa in general. Some of the graduates of these centres came back to Nigeria and established Islamic centres while some of them were appointed as Qadis (Islamic jurist) some of them became administrators and translators for the traditional rulers of the former Islamic states (Galadanci 1982). It is pertinent to say that at the eve of the amalgamation of both the Northern and Southern provinces in 1912 C.E which later becomes what is known today as Nigeria, it was estimated that more than 19,000 Quranic schools with over 143,000 students flourishing in Northern Nigeria (Adesina 2011).

However, the first method of the introduction of the so-called secular subjects into Arabic and Islamic institutions was used in Katsina College in 1930 when the college broadened its curriculum by introducing science and other conventional subjects (Oloyede 2012). The Northern Provinces Law School was later established in 1934 by the Emirs of the Northern Nigerian under the auspices of the Colonial administrators for the purpose of training Islamic jurist that later became judges in the Sharia courts. The products of the school were the first set of Muslim scholars that were very conversant in both Western and Islamic education. The name of the school was later changed to School of Arabic Studies, Kano (al-Ilori, 1978)

English and Arithmetic were later taught in the school with other Arabic and Islamic subjects. This method assisted in the production of junior primary school teachers and it admitted students of ‘ilmiyah” schools who had never attended any conventional primary school. (Raji 2002) The opportunity created by this method paved way for the students to pursue their education up to university level in London, Cairo, Khartoum and Libya.(Mustapha 2001). According to Opeloye (1998), he notes that many of the top government functionaries today in Nigeria are products of that school; among them are the Grand Qadis, Chief justice, Secretaries in government functionaries, University Vice Chancellors and Professors. He observes that the lesson that should be learnt from this school system is that Institution of Islamic Education if organized to take cognizance of its immediate environment can be very useful to the society (Opeloye, 1998).

The Arabic Language in the Nigerian Higher Education Curriculum

The introduction of Arabic in the higher education curriculum was as a result of the establishment of the first University in Nigeria. This was the ultimate out-come of the Elliot commission set up by the British Government in 1943 to investigate on the organisation and facilities of the existing centres of higher education in the British West African colonies and to make recommendations regarding future university development in that area (Fafunwa 1972; Adesina, 2011). The result of the commission led to the establishment of the first University College in Nigeria which was formally opened in October, 1948 and named University College Ibadan an affiliate of University of London.

More so, the School of Oriental and African Studies in the University of London realised the establishment of University College Ibadan as an avenue to have access to many of the materials on the history of Africa that were written in Arabic language, hence this became the motive and the starting point of the introduction of Arabic language into the programmes offered by the University (Raji 2002; Ogunbiyi 2003; Abubakri 2002).

According to Ogunbiyi (2003), he highlights the factors that led to the inclusion of Arabic language in the curriculum of University of Ibadan. He opines that the first factor was as a result of the Universal Free Primary Education introduced by Government of the Western Region in 1955. This led to an increased need for teachers to handle various subject including Islamic Religious Knowledge and it was observed that there were no trained teachers to handle the subject except the products of the local Arabic schools, as result of this, certificate course in Arabic and Islamic studies were introduced to train those Arabic teachers. The Second factor was the growing awareness among the Nigerian historians of the importance of Arabic language to the study of the pre- colonial history of Africa while the third factor was the interest of the indigenous historians in the University that were favourably disposed to the establishment of Arabic language department in the University College led by Kenneth Dikke, a professor of history who later became the first Vice chancellor of the full-fledged University (Ogunbiyi, 2003).

As a result of this, the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies was established in the University of Ibadan in 1962 and the first Head of the Department was John Hunwick a graduate of Arabic history from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. It is noteworthy to say that those that initiated the inclusion of Arabic language in the curriculum of the University College were all Christians among them are; John Hunwick, Kenneth Dikke, Sergeant and William Kensdale who was posted to the University as a librarian. He was interested in the collection of Arabic manuscripts from the immediate environment of the College and the rest of Nigeria. (Raji, 2002). This led to the establishment of the Centre for Arabic Documentation at the Institute of African Studies of the University. (Abubakri, 2002). This clearly shows that the mission of the inclusion of Arabic language in the curriculum of higher education in Nigerian system of education goes beyond the study of Islamic knowledge alone but it has wider objectives with a curriculum that was set up to meet those objectives.

Pertinent to say that the first graduates of the Department are Christians and they also diversified into different professions and became successful in their various fields of human endeavour. The Department has also produced a Christian professor in Arabic language and a Christian Doctorate degree holder in Arabic drama (Raji, 2002). Many of the products of the University have become Professors of Arabic and Islamic Studies in various Nigerian Institutions of higher learning. The twin subject was also introduced in 1963 at Abdullah Bayero College of the Ahmadu Bello University which was an offshoot of the School of Arabic Studies, Kano. Arabic and Islamic Studies Departments were later established in other Universities in Nigeria most especially in the Northern part of the country.

Teaching of the Arabic Language at Nigerian Universities at the Crossroads

The study of Arabic and Islamic studies in Nigerian institutions was plunged into a crisis in their bid to harmonise the intellectual gap between the modern secular education that emphasises modern knowledge and religious orientation of Arabic/Islamic education that emphasises religious sciences with the aim of producing an Islamic scholar. Raji (1988) asserts that the distinction between the secular and the Islamic education becomes more pronounced and the conflict climaxed in the universities with the introduction of Arabic and Islamic education at the University of Ibadan in 1961 and the twin subject was also introduced at Abdullah Bayero College of the Ahmadu Bello University in 1963. He cited an evidence from the paper presented by the former provost of Abdullah Bayero College at the University of Ibadan Arabic Seminar in which the Provost identified a host of problems most of which were rooted in this fundamental conflict. The provost asked the following questions:

The University was torn for example between meeting the secular demands of the University system and religious demand of Islamic education and those communities they were meant to serve. Should they adopt English in accordance with the University policy, as the medium of instruction in teaching Arabic / Islamic education instead of traditional Arabic language? Should the non-Muslim orientalist be employed to instruct? And their books recommended for use instead of Arabic textbooks in Arabic /Islamic education? (p.12)

Giving an answer to the questions stated above, Raji, (1988) gives kudos to Bayero University formerly Abdullah Bayero College. He asserts that the University has gradually overcome these secular forces that proved insurmountable for the University of Ibadan as a pioneer University. He notes that the University has consistently identified herself with the policy of Arabic/Islamic education, rather than secular policy of the University of Ibadan. He asserts that Arabic has continued to be used as medium of instruction with Arabic textbooks while the appointment of non-Muslim orientalist or the use of their books were totally discouraged in Arabic/Islamic education. At the same time, the syllabus drawn for the subject is not inferior to that of any Arab-Muslim university.

In contrary, Abdul-Rahmon (2008) demystifies the criticism against the involvement of non-Muslims in the teaching of Arabic/Islamic education in University of Ibadan. He asserts that the main factor that contributes to the underdevelopment of Arabic language in Nigerian institutions is the excessive theocentric perception of Arabic language. He maintains that the apathetic behaviour of the non-Muslim government officials and the generality of non-Muslims toward Arabic language which resulted in psychological hatred and fear arise from the Muslims' attitude of exclusiveness, in which many of the so-called modern Arabic/Islamic Scholars share this ridiculous sentiment.

This issue has become so much complicated between the Southern and Northern Universities, the former recognizes the secular policy of the university and English as medium of instruction while the latter insists on pure Arabic/Islamic traditional system of education and undiluted Arabic as the medium of instruction.

Therefore, there is need for reconciliation between the two schools of thought by putting into consideration the following fundamental questions that need to be addressed as far as this research is concern:

1. What is the appropriate medium of instruction in teaching a modern or second language?
2. What is the position of English language in the teaching and learning of Arabic/Islamic education?
3. What is the relevance of the present curriculum of Arabic /Islamic education in Nigerian institutions to the contemporary society?

Medium of Instruction in Teaching Modern Language

The most crucial aspect of teaching Arabic in Nigerian institutions of higher learning is the medium of instruction. The theoretical question that needs to be asked in this aspect is; can a foreign language be used to teach and learn another foreign language? In order to get an appropriate answer to this question different views and theories in teaching a foreign language were highlighted below.

The first thing that needs to be established is that in teaching second language, the language input (listening) must be higher than the level of language production expected of the pupils. This means that teachers need to develop the habit of speaking the language to the students several times for the students' listening, and this will gradually become meaningful to the hearing of the student. Chomsky (1975) developed a theory of language acquisition in which the learner is described as the generator of the language rules, to this extent his view is that learner develops acquisition of the target language through his own effort by joining what he heard together to pass a meaningful message.

This notion was also taken by Corder (1967) he argues that language errors made by students indicate the development of the underlying competences. Selinker (1972) referred to the learner's errors as the positive effort of learning new language. Krashen (1987) in his theory of communicative learning competence hold the view that language can be learnt or acquired. He believed that the process of language acquisition through communication is the best form of having good competence and proficiency of the target language. Bailey (1985) presents the results of classroom research on «the good language teacher». Some of the characteristics of outstanding teachers' lessons involved: More use of the target language by the teacher and the students combined, more teacher talk in the foreign language, more student talk in the foreign language and less student talk which is off the task.

Based on the views of the foreign languages experts stated above. It shows that the best methodology of teaching and learning a second or modern language is the communicative language teaching. This view has been upheld by the Modern Language Association as clearly stated by Burke (2011): she asserts that:

The Modern Language Association (MLA) Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages advocated in a report that language majors at the university level "should become educated speakers who have deep trans lingual and transcultural competence," with the capability to operate between languages. Teachers would focus on students' ability to function as informed and capable interlocutors and use a more holistic cross-curricular approach to language learning and teaching. Students would understand the world and themselves through the lens of another language and culture (p.13)

Many researchers also hold the view that teachers of Modern language must always focus on communication in the classrooms, facilitate students' development of communicative competence and use a communicative approach to language teaching (CLT) (Burke, 2006, 2007; Savignon, 1997). According to Burke (2011) quoting Canale (1983) she asserts that the components of grammatical competence, discourse competence, strategic competence, and sociolinguistic competence offer a model of communicative competence as a basis for curriculum design and classroom practice. She concludes that this model closely resembles what the MLA committee (2007) emphasizes in its explanation of translingual and transcultural competence.

Therefore, teachers of a second or foreign language should always create a curriculum and instruction that promote students' development of communicative competence (Burke, 2006; Savignon, 1983, 1997). And must always take cognizance of the use of instructional methods

such as immersion, where both the teachers and students speak only the target language during class, and provide students with comprehensible input (Krashen, 1981).

The Position of English Language in the Teaching and Learning of Arabic/Islamic Education

It has been observed by many researchers that some teachers of Arabic language in Nigerian institutions of higher learning lack good mastery and communication of English language. (Oseni, 1988 ; Raji, 1999 ; Abdulrahim, 2009). Oseni, 1988 laments lack of confidence among the teachers of Arabic language because some of them find it difficult to express themselves in English and since the society is dominated with Western values in which English language is mainly used to transmit these values, therefore, the Arabic teachers that do not have good mastery of the language always exhibit inferiority complex, and in order to be accepted in their various schools, they become subservient to their boss and colleagues.

However, the importance of English language in Nigerian System of Education cannot be over emphasized. This is borne out of the fact that it is the Nigerian official language. It is also the second language and a medium of instruction in formal school system. Therefore, it is incumbent on both teachers and students at all level of Nigerian education system to have good mastery of the language. Abdul-Rahmon (2008) elucidates the importance of the acquisition of English language by the Arabic teachers as follows:

Proficiency in the Nigerian official language is of necessity for any Arabist/Islamist to function properly in the aspect of social integration. It is no secret that the disability of many of the Arabists in written and spoken English has hampered their efficiency. Such people become docile and reclusive in their place of work and as such become object of ridicule in most cases; hence they are incapable of defending their discipline when it is necessary to do so (p.10).

Moreover, the teaching of English language in Arabic/Islamic programmes should be done in such a way that it will not affect the standard of Arabic communication skill expected of the students studying the programme. Abdulraheem (2009) opines that English has not only replaced Arabic language in almost human endeavor but completely relegated it to background. He made an example of the situation in which the power of Arabic language has been withdrawn as a medium of instruction for Islamic studies, Islamic law, and even Arabic language. In which many institution are no more required knowledge or certification in Arabic before admission for Islamic related courses. Pertinent to say that there are some Arabic graduates that cannot converse effectively in Arabic language and some of them do not have good mastery of English language. This is as a result of the methodology applied by the individual university. The latter can be attributed to Arabic graduates from the Northern part of the country while the former is commonly noticed among the Arabic students from the Southern part of the country.

However, an intensive training in English language should be mounted for such students and the students themselves should make a concerted effort to master the communication of English language so that the erroneous believe of people about the poor English background of Arabic teachers as observed by Abdul-Rahmon (2008) and Oseni (1988) would be totally eradicated. This is also the stand of Oloyede (2012) when he observed that:

“From within and outside Nigeria indicate that in addition to deep knowledge in the Islamics, certain inter-personal and communication skills are necessary for effective delivery of the dividends of the twin subjects in a pluralistic setting such as Nigeria”.

More so, extra curriculum activities should always be organized for Arabic students that have low background of the language so as to improve their Arabic language efficiency. These may include; immersion and acculturation programmes, summer courses and visitation to the Arabic countries. Oderinde (2007) on this issue suggests that Arabic by Radio programme should be re-introduced in Nigerian broadcasting stations to enlightening non-Muslims that Arabic is not only for Muslims but a communicative tool like other foreign languages. Extra moral activities such as Arabic School Club, Arabic student' writing competitions and Arabic Banquet should be organized in all tertiary institutions with the support of Arabic speaking country embassies in Nigeria.

Relevance of the Present Curriculum of Arabic Education in Nigerian Institutions to the Contemporary Society

Critical observation of the present Arabic curriculum in Nigerian institutions shows that the content of the curriculum is too abstract and theoretical and many of the courses do not include practical skills that are relevant to the contemporary situation. The curriculum needs to be redesigned so that the students will have the ability of facing their future challenges in the aspect of economic, social, political, technological and intellectual advancement. All these are needed for their survival in the contemporary society. It was observed that the contents of the curriculum do not have any relationship with the intending professions of the students. When some students were asked about their future carrier, they chose professions like Arabic broadcasting, diplomacy, and bilingual translation. More so, the content does not have any specific purpose on vocational skills such as broadcasting, carrier diplomacy and entrepreneurship.

Moreover, these observations tend to agree with the views of other researchers in the field of teaching and learning Arabic language in Nigeria (Oladosu, 1986; Raji, 1996; Bidmos, 1996; Oloyede, 2003; and Oloyede, 2012). Oloyede (2003) asserts that the curriculum of the Arabic language and Islamic studies as a twin subject is unwittingly made abstract and theoretical, instead of its real nature as a practical way of life. Oloyede, (2012) expresses further that advanced training in Arabic or Islamic studies should incorporate some conventional disciplines such as official language of the immediate community of the learner, economics, elementary mathematics, political science, international relations, status and situation of Muslims in different parts of the world as well as the use of the computer. Therefore the present Arabic curriculum in Nigerian institutions needs total overhauling so as to be in conformity with needs of the students in order achieve the aims and objectives of teaching the language in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Nigerian education system in general is faced with multifaceted challenges resulting from the myriad of issues such as political, social and economic instability. It is therefore pertinent to say that with the amazing rates of change in the world today, there is need for readjustment in Nigeria educational curriculum from time to time to meet the societal demands of the global economy.

This study believes that a dynamic and progressive nation demands an education that will create sincerity and good life for its members. Therefore, to adjust to the changing time there has to be constant evaluation of the entire existing curriculum to ensure that they still meet the needs of the times. This will also go a long way to find everlasting solutions to some of the salient problems confronting the teaching and learning of Arabic language in Nigerian institutions of higher learning.

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