

Learning Arabic as a Second Language and its Importance in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

It is the belief of some Nigerians, especially the Christians that Arabic Language belongs to the Islamic religion alone, and whoever learns it is believed to be a Muslim. Documents written in Arabic, irrespective of the writer's faith or religion, the contents and subject matters are termed Islamic. Hence, the apprehension they have for it. However, the reason behind this perception is multi-faceted. Most glaring and conspicuous among them are: (a) Biased mind and wrong impression they have about Islam, and (b) Majority of Arabic learners in their environments are Muslims, hence the negative attitude they have for the language. This paper seeks to erase these negative perception and prejudices, highlights the need to learn Arabic language as a second language and re-examine its importance to our contemporary society. It is observed that Arabic as a living language has served as a source of sciences as noted that some words in Arabic still remain in the books of Science and Mathematics. Therefore, it is recommended among others the government should put more efforts in removing the barriers to study this language and to make it compulsory at the primary and secondary school levels in the school curriculum.

Keywords: *Arabic Language, Second Language, Islamic religion*

INTRODUCTION

Arabic, like advanced natural languages such as English and French, is one of the languages that has acquired an international status in the United Nations Organization and other international bodies. It is also used for international relations, diplomacy and religious concerns. According to Adeyemi (2012), the teaching of Arabic language in non-Arabic speaking countries has always been associated with Islam. Although, Arabic as a language, either spoken or read is used everyday by more than a quarter of the world population, yet Sikiru (1994) posits that some people are skeptical in touching any Arabic written document in some quarters. No convinced reason is given for this than the negative perception and the notion that Arabic is one of the useless, backward and unproductive languages in the world (Farrukh, 2007). The notion that Arabic language is useless, backward and unproductive in Nigeria is based on the view that Arabic language is written from the right to the left as compare to English language which is written from the left to the right. Among the factors responsible for this notion include: (a) System of operation in Arabic schools, and (b) Government's attitude towards Arabic learning etc. (Sikiru, 1994). However, efforts have been made at institutional and individual levels to develop Arabic language education and integrate it into the main stream of Nigerian educational system because of

its value (Adeyemi, 2012). According to Bamgbose (1991), language has established itself as the characteristic medium of interaction in the species and even in its earliest observable forms. It has been seen as astonishing of its splits into different versions and the shape of its elements changes even among hereditary users. It is imperative to note the importance of language in the midst of other living creatures such as animals, birds and humans. As far as Arabic is concerned, Farrukh (2007) states that the Arabs called themselves 'Araban' and called non-Arabs 'Ajam' for being ignorant of their language and not articulate like them. Till date, Arabic remains unchanged. Oseni (2000) stresses that Arabic induces all fields of its study such as philology, syntax, translation, etymology, phonology, rhetorics, reading, lexicography, literature, prosody and history. The relevance of Arabic in the global setting is its contribution to the development and enrichment of some other natural languages. Therefore, Arabic language can be studied for many purposes beyond its religious association (Adeyemi, 2012). Basically, the aim of this study is to erase the negative perception about Arabic Language and prejudices, highlights the need to learn it as a second language and re-examine its importance to our contemporary society.

RELEVANCE OF ARABIC LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA

Fafunwa (1974) explains that for centuries scholars have realized that Arabic as a language and Islam as a religion have contributed substantially to world civilization. It was through the Arabs and not the Romans that the modern world achieved light and power through science (Fafunwa, 1974). Indeed, Arabic is a language and at the same time the source of Islam. It is not synonymous to Islamic or Muslims. Islamic or Muslims are a part of inseparable twin. It is imperative to point out that while Islam is the religion of the Muslims, Arabic is the language of communication. This Approach does not detract from the importance of Arabic as a language in a secular context. Adegbite (2003) justifies it as an international language and the *lingua franca* of twenty-two nations in the World. Basically, there is no difference between Arabic language of today and that yesterday. It remains a standard language. In addition, other characteristics such as eloquence, fluency, melody amidst others. Arabic language has maintained its qualities among the fleet of international languages. Some areas in which Arabic language can be useful to our society that will give impetus to learn it or even to make it compulsory subject in the school curriculum from primary to secondary school levels are include its contribution in science, technology, media, world trade, international policies, religion as well as information and communication technology.

Arabic as a Language in Science and Technology: The relevance of Arabic language in the global setting is emphasised on its contribution to the development and enrichment of some other world languages. Jamiu (2003) stresses that Arabic preceded other important world languages like English and French as the language of sciences, in many books of modern science. No other language in the past played such vital roles in science and technology, as Arabic. In chemistry, words like "alcohol" and "alkali" are derived from Arabic names *al-kahl* and *al-qaliy* respectively (Jamiu, 2003). Adeyemi (2011) observes

that in the 12th and 13th centuries, the nations of Europe began to wake up from their condition of intellectual backwardness and set out to learn from the Muslims. Some European Scholars traveled to Muslim Universities to learn particularly to the famous Muslim Universities in Spain. Others embarked on translation of the works from ARABIC to LATIN. These had a great impact on western scholars in a large measure to the European Renaissance (Adeyemi, 2011).

Arabic as a recognized Language in the Media World: According to Jamiu (2003), no language in the African continent surpasses Arabic in terms of international and global acceptability. The language is spoken by more than one third of inhabitants of the African continent. He stresses further that the global relevance of Arabic is manifested in mass media and information technology. Nigerian diplomatic mission in the Arab world as well as Arab embassies in Nigeria have vacancies for competent Arabists, who will represent the interests of Nigeria especially when unsubstantiated news about the country is spread by the local news media (Ogunbiyi, 2005). Today, there are over one hundred Arabic newspapers and not less than one hundred and twenty international journals published in the Arab world, Africa and across Europe and America in Arabic language. At the local level, Nigeria Association of Teachers of Arabic and Islamic Studies (NATAIS), Nigeria Association of Teachers of Arabic Language and Literature (NATALL) and some other magazines owned by private individuals or organizations in Nigeria are published in Arabic language and English. In the media World, for instance, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Voice of America (VOA), Deutchewelle, Radio France International, Japan Radio and Voice of Nigeria (VON) have channels in Arabic communication.

Arabic as a Language of Trade: From time immemorial, Nigeria is noted for trade relationship with Arab Nations. Therefore, Arabic language has remained the major language of trade between Nigerians and the Arabs. Arabic as the language of trade between Nigerians and the Arabs is as important as English and French to Nigeria. Amuni (1998) states that the importance of Arabic in World trade manifested in the fact that the language features on reading manuals and other commercial activities. Adeyemi (1996) explains further that there is a great deal of evidence that our reasoning capacity and our sensitivity have been constantly improved by imitation of the great masters of language in their various forms. The respect which Muslim scholars give to oral instruction in learning by imitation and repetition has a sound basis in human experience and in human psychology. It is admitted that Arabic is the third or fourth language to be learnt in Nigeria, still, it has its difficulties and problems as a language as well as its attractions. It is a language that exists in both spoken and written form (Adeyemi, 2012). Therefore, the attractions and needs of Arabic Language outweigh the difficulties in Nigeria.

Arabic as a Language in Telecommunication and Information Technology: The latest in the information technology available in Nigeria today is the Global System for Mobile Communication (GSM) Handsets which now have Arabic letters of the alphabet,

sign and symbols for communication effectiveness between the communicators and facilitators. According to Tijani (2003), the exchange of communication ideas between two friends who speak Arabic language on the GSM improves the skill level of the users. Arabic scholars and students in Nigeria can interact with broadcasting centers to enjoy news, programmes, documentaries, games, and publications, national and international events.

Arabic as a Language in Politics: According to Abdu-Raheem (2001), a language can be used for political reasons as well. For instance, Nigerians should man Nigerian embassies in Arabic-speaking countries. If there is a shortage of Arabic-proficient manpower in the field, this implies that foreigners will be employed to do the job for our country? Furthermore, at the newly established African Union is predicated on political interaction among the members. Their countries for political gain will use those who are vast in international languages. There are places for qualified translators and secretaries with competence in Arabic and English languages. Some years ago, an eminent Nigerian vying for the post of United Nations Secretary-General lost out because he was not competent in the use of French, one of the prerequisites for the job. The Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) needs people who are fluent in Arabic language for political interaction among Arab countries that will bring many advantages to the countries. Since Arabic language is allowed in the Organization, if this language is neglected, many benefits will not come to the country through diplomacy of these international organizations.

Arabic as a Religious Language: Seriki and Lawal (2003) opine that Arabic is recognized as the religious language of Islam and assumes the position of eminence and global relevance in that regard. Among all the major religions in the world such as Islam, Christianity, Hindus etc., Islam is the most unique of these religions because its adherents communicate spiritually with one language to Allah that is Arabic. Others use different and more than one language to communicate to their Creator. Malik as cited in Jamiu (2003) asserts that portions of Arabic Qur'an must be recited by every Muslim all over the world in its original text on a daily basis, no matter what his/her or native tongue may be. Allah is the originator of every language and thus understands and appreciates all. Ogunbiyi (2005) rightly states, mass education in Arabic language is likely to improved mutual understanding between Muslims and non-Muslim mates who would now have insight into the language that plays such a unique role in the religious life of the Muslims.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The need to learn Arabic language as a second language in Nigeria is apparent like other international languages such as English and French. Learning. It does not change ones religious believe to Islam unless he/she wishes to do so for other reasons. Instances are drawn to support this view. Arabic as a living language has served as a source of sciences as noted that some words in Arabic still remain in the books of Science and Mathematics. In the past, some European scholars traveled to Muslim Universities to learn Arabic language. Others embarked on translation of the works from Arabic to Latin. These contributed a lot to the development of Science in Europe. A country that has scholars in

this field can benefit from it as a source of information as a link between her and Arabic speaking countries on trade and business interaction. Others are on the political terrain, to provide job opportunities for the citizens and diplomats to our embassies abroad where Arabic is their official language etc. Government should put more efforts in removing the barriers to study this language and to make it compulsory at the primary and secondary school levels in the school curriculum. Arabic schools, especially, in the southern part of the country should change their system to encourage people to learn this language. Parents should know that Arabic is a lucrative course, if one reads it up to a tertiary level. Arabic is a language that anybody can learn irrespective of his religion or tribe. It is observed that in some Colleges of Education as well as the Universities, non Muslim Nigerian Students study Arabic language and do not change their religious faith to Muslim. Therefore, Nigerians should not feel shy or feel ashamed in learning Arabic language anywhere.

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