

**THE UNIVERSITY CURRICULUM AND GRADUATE UNEMPLOYMENT IN
NIGERIA: THE CASE OF THE B.A. (FRENCH) CURRICULUM**

Mike T. U. Edung

Department of Foreign Languages

University of Uyo

Uyo, Nigeria

E-mail: udoedung@yahoo.com

Abstract

This essay examines the problem of the unemployment of the Nigerian B.A. (French) graduate attributed to the fact that the B.A. (French) curriculum in Nigerian Universities does not offer the graduate the knowledge and skills generally required in today's labour market. After specifying the senses in which the terms "curriculum" and "graduate unemployment" are used here, the essay goes on to examine the B.A. (French) curriculum as it is generally implemented in Nigerian Universities today, and attempts to highlight why it leads to the unemployment of its graduates. The essay further draws attention to the curriculum of two Nigerian universities – Abia State University, Uturu, and University of Uyo, which have made concrete attempts to address the problem. The essay ends with a clear call on the planners of the B.A. (French) curriculum in Nigerian universities to take concrete steps to address the problem by going in the direction of Uturu and Uyo, and makes some concrete suggestions for such curricular innovation.

Keywords: Curriculum, graduate unemployment, B.A. French, Nigerian universities

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1. Introduction

The issue of graduate unemployment with all its negative economic and social consequences has posed a grave national development problem for Nigeria for decades now. According to Oluseyi and Elegbede (2012), graduate unemployment showed its first signs in Nigeria in the late 1970s. Expectedly, government and private researchers have since been

studying this phenomenon, identifying its causes and effects, and proffering solutions to it. Its causes have been identified and located in the diverse sections of our national life, such as the political leadership which has been blamed for misguided policy choices and social mismanagement (ihenacho.www.utexas.edu/conferences/Africa/ads/870.htm), poor national economic planning resulting in the dearth of investment or venture capital (Adawo and Atan, 2013), labour market distortions (Bassey and Atan, 2012), and the educational system (Ajayi, Adeniji and Adu, 2008; Oluseyi and Elegbede, 2012), among others.

The educational system, and particularly its university sub-sector, as the cause of graduate unemployment in Nigeria, has naturally interested the Nigerian university teacher which this writer is. One of the aspects of the Nigerian university system that have been blamed for graduate unemployment is the curriculum. Ajayi, Adeniji and Adu (2008) for instance have recommended at the end of their study that Nigerian universities should tackle graduate unemployment through “a thorough and complete restructuring of their curriculum content in order to make them more relevant to contemporary needs. This recommendation presupposes that graduate unemployment in Nigeria is the consequence of a curriculum content that is either outright irrelevant or not relevant enough to the needs of the society, and by implication, to the needs of the labour market. The above view of Ajayi, Adeniji and Adu (2008) is corroborated by Bassey and Atan (2012) who infer from earlier studies by others that “most curricula of Nigerian universities bear little or no practical relevance to the needs of the economy”.

It is in the context of the much reported irrelevance or little relevance of the Nigerian university curriculum as a cause of the university graduate unemployment in Nigeria, that we have undertaken to examine the particular case of the curriculum that produces the Nigerian university graduate of French, with a view to ascertaining the degree of its relevance to the current needs of the Nigerian labour market, and the implication of such degree of relevance for the employability of the graduates.

This study, being a bibliographic research, relies entirely on evidence from previous studies and official documents. In the pursuit of this study, we shall first of all attempt to clarify the sense in which the terms of “graduate unemployment” and the “curriculum” are used here. We shall then proceed to examine the curriculum of the B.A. (French) programme in Nigeria, in order to show its degree of relevance to the needs of the Nigerian labour market within the

context of the present-day Nigerian economy. Based on the findings of this examination, the study shall suggest a kind of curriculum that could generate employment for the Nigerian university graduate of French.

2. Graduate unemployment

The online version of the New World Encyclopedia says that unemployment is the condition of willing workers lacking jobs or gainful employment. (www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Unemployment). Gbosi, cited by Bassey and Atan (2012) define unemployment as a situation in which people who are willing to work at the prevailing wage rate are unable to find jobs. For the International Labour Organization (ILO), “unemployed worker” are those who are currently not working, but are willing to work and have actively searched for work. (Adapted from the often cited Resolution of the 13th International Conference of Labour Statisticians, October, 1980).

Graduate unemployment in our study therefore refers to a situation where University graduates, i.e. holders of university degree, are not in gainful employment, but are willing to work, and are actively searching for job. Wikipedia puts it quite simply that “graduate unemployment is unemployment among people with an academic degree”. It adds, interestingly for this study, that

(r)esearch undertaken proved that the unemployment , and much more so, underemployment of graduates, are devastating phenomena in the lives of graduates, and a high incidence of either are definite indicators of institutional ineffectiveness and inefficiency. (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Graduate_unemployment)

Curriculum irrelevance which has massively been blamed for graduate unemployment in Nigeria, is certainly a case of institutional inefficiency, because it is an aspect of the inefficiency of the educational system as a social institution, as the rest of this discussion shall attempt to show.

3. The Nigerian University B.A. (French) Curriculum

The study of French for a university degree began rather earlier in the history of university education in Nigeria. Omolewa (1971), informs us that university French teaching

began in Nigeria “in 1959 when the then University College, Ibadan, appointed two lecturers to form the nucleus of a Modern Languages Department which was later established in 1962”. Other university Departments for the teaching of French came into being as other universities were established in Nigeria, beginning with the establishment of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in 1960, where French was taught from inception. What happened at Nsukka repeated itself with the establishment of the University of Lagos, Lagos, the University of Ife, Ile Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife), and Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, all of which were established in 1962. Today, over fifty Nigerian universities award the B.A. degree in French.

It would appear that from the initial days until now, not much has changed in the university French curriculum in Nigeria. In this regard we have found Emordi repeating in 2000, 40 years from the first days of university French teaching in Nigeria, essentially what he had said in 1992, based on remarks earlier made by David in 1969. Emordi (1992) had cited David (1969) who was indeed discussing the teaching of French in Anglophone African universities, to have said that « [...] dans beaucoup d’universités [...], l’enseignement est singulièrement avec une grande partie faite à l’histoire de la langue, à la littérature, à la civilisation française » [in many universities, the teaching devoted a singularly large attention to the history of the (French) language, to literature, to French civilisation]. (This and all other translations from the French in this discussion are made by this writer.). Recalling David’s observation, Emordi had noted in 1992 that

l’enseignement du français dans le cycle supérieur au Nigéria garde encore un caractère trop traditionnaliste, trop littéraire. L’image de l’enseignement du français dans les universités de l’Afrique anglophone des années 60 qu’a présentée J. David (1969), ne diffère pas beaucoup de celle qui existe dans les universités nigérianes d’aujourd’hui.

[the teaching of French in Nigerian universities is still too traditionalistic, too literary. The picture of the teaching of French in Anglophone African universities in the 60s which J. David (1969) painted, is not different from what obtains in Nigerian universities today]

Except for leaving out the reference to David's 1969 observation, these were essentially the remarks made by Emordi again in 2000.

Emordi's and David's remarks are pertinent to our examination of the present-day Nigerian university B.A. (French) curriculum. To begin with, David's remark shows that the traditional areas of French studies, and indeed of foreign language studies are, the language itself, creative writing in that language, and the culture and civilization of the native and other speakers of that language. In examining the B.A. (French) curriculum in Nigerian universities, we shall consider only the courses allotted to French studies *per se*, as opposed to, for instance, General Studies (GST) courses, and courses borrowed from other disciplines. In determining the skills and competences that this curriculum offers to its products, we shall consider the work load in these three areas of language (which trains the students in the actual language skills), literature (which gives the students knowledge and skills in the appreciation and critical analysis of literary works, authors and periods), and culture and civilization (which gives the students knowledge of a cultural value which can be put to use with great benefit in multicultural situations). This will give us a picture of the type of knowledge and skills with which the students go into the labour at the end of their studies.

For our study of present-day Nigerian B.A. (French) curriculum, let us examine what is proposed by the National Universities Commission (NUC) in the current (2007) version of the Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS) for undergraduate Arts/Humanities disciplines in Nigerian universities. The space constraint of a journal article would not permit us to reproduce here the descriptions and the credit hours of the French courses in the B.A. (French) programme as proposed in the NUC BMAS. However, by grouping the French courses into the areas of Language, literature, and culture and civilization, we are simply presenting here the total credit hours of the courses in each group. This represents, so to say, the weight of training received by students in each of these areas. This is a way of assessing the type of knowledge and skills which the products of the curriculum take with them to the labour market. We therefore present below, (i) the total credit hours in each of the areas of language, literature, and culture and civilization, for each level or year of study in the B.A. (French) programme (100 Level or the Year 1, 200 Level or Year 2, etc.); (ii) the total number of credit hours for each of these three

areas at the end of the programme of study, and (iii) the percentages that these totals represent *vis-à-vis* the total number of credit hours for all the French courses put together at the end of the programme of study. This, we believe, gives us something of a picture of the degree of training, in terms of knowledge, skills, and competence that the students receive in each area at the end of their studies.

Table showing the weighting of Language, Literature and Culture and Civilisation courses in the NUC BMAS Sample B.A. (French) Syllabus

Year of Study	Language Courses	Literature Courses	Culture Courses	Total
1	12 CH	4 CH	-	16
2	12 CH	10 CH	2 CH	24
3	18 CH	10 CH	2 CH	30
4	8 CH	18 CH	4 CH	30
TOTALS	50 CH	42 CH	8 CH	100

The above data from the sample syllabus proposed by the NUC for the B.A. (French) programme of study shows that over the four years duration of the study programme, fifty percent (50%) of the course content in French trains the students in the general use of the French language through courses in grammar, spoken and written communication, and translation. Forty-two percent (42%) of the course content in French trains the students in literature; while eight percent (8%) gives the students knowledge and information on the culture of France and of other French-speaking peoples. Indeed, this is the general picture in the French teaching departments in Nigerian universities. These weightings clearly show that the Nigerian B.A. (French) curriculum still trains its students in literature, or to put it more pointedly, in the use of the general French language in the reading and appreciation of literary texts, including their translation. The point to make here is to ask what chances of employment such competence and skills can readily give the graduates in the present-day labour market. An examination of the realities of the present-day labour market should provide answers to this vital question.

4.Labour Market Opportunities for the Nigerian Graduate of French

It would appear that most authorities and planners of the B.A. (French) curriculum of Nigerian universities have a good idea of the type of job openings awaiting their graduates. Stating one of the objectives of the B.A. (French) programme, as it specifically concerns the possible job openings for graduates of the programme, the NUC BMAS document writes as follows:

- (ii) To equip the students with the knowledge of the forms and features of the varieties of French used in different professional domains such as business communication, diplomatic service, legal communication, electronic broadcast media, print journalism, book publishing and biography writing. (NUC, BMAS: 127).

Under the section titled “Job and Career Opportunities for Graduates”, the current edition of the *Undergraduate Students’ Handbook* of this writer’s Department (2019), for instance, also states as follows:

Graduates of the programme have excellent opportunities in those careers and jobs which involve ensuring international communication, understanding and cooperation through effective knowledge and use of the foreign language(s) they have acquired: the Diplomatic service, the International Organisations, the Armed and the Security services (the Military Forces, the Police, Immigrations and Customs services, etc.), the multinational business concerns, the international relations departments of national business concerns, the Press, publishing, the public relations, marketing, travel, tourism, hospitality industries, etc.

The point to make here is to underscore the surprising fact that the same authorities who have foreseen the above-stated job opportunities go on to design and teach courses that, by way of any specialty, only train the graduates in literary studies. Apart from teaching in schools, and perhaps general reporting/writing in journalism, it is clear that the competence of the Nigerian B.A. (French) graduate can hardly get him a job in any of the careers foreseen for him above. Going by their descriptions, there is not a single course in the NUC BMAS B.A. (French) syllabus that

is designed to teach the features of the French language used in the careers mentioned above as holding prospective job opportunities for the Nigerian B.A. (French) graduate. Little wonder therefore that there is so much unemployment and frustration for the Nigerian holder of the B.A. degree in French. If he must get a job readily, the graduate of French produced by the current curriculum must of necessity go in for some other training. And how many of the average Nigerian families can afford a further training for a child whom they had managed to see through a university training once? However, the situation is not altogether a hopeless one as some scholars and French teaching departments in some Nigerian universities have recently begun to give a thought to designing what may be called a “labour market-oriented B.A. (French) curriculum.

5. Towards a Labour market-oriented B.A. (French) Curriculum

The evident “unemployability” of the Nigerian B.A. (French) graduate has produced two lines of action in the effort to redesign the curriculum to address this malady. One of these is already at work at the Department of Foreign Languages and Translation Studies of Abia State University, Uturu, while the other is beginning to yield results at the Department of Foreign Languages, University of Uyo, where this writer teaches and has been laboring to nurture it over the years.

At Abia State University, it all began with “the vision of professionalization of language studies that led to the birth of the Language Centre of Abia State University” (Anyaehe, 1997: iv). In his editorial comments in the maiden edition of *The Language Professional: A Journal of Language and Communication Arts and Sciences*, Anyaehe gives the genesis of this vision in the following words which we have taken the liberty to quote at great length:

Pioneer Director of the Language Centre, Imo State University, Etiti, Nigeria, (now Abia State University, Uturu, Nigeria) from 1981 to 1992, Professor Ihenacho, worked towards the professionalization of foreign language studies in Nigeria.

The common practice in Nigerian universities and, to a considerable extent, in most conventional universities worldwide, has been the study of classic authors in the language of choice. These studies, while contributing to the overall development of the

individual's personality, often lack such focus as would enable the individual earn a living in the increasingly technological and highly competitive labour market into which the language graduate is launched. More often than not, the individual is constrained to painfully reeducate himself, to rethink his entire formal education, to re-analyse consciously or unconsciously, the elements of the already completed programme so as to sort out and harness to his future professional practice relevant elements of the language discipline he has studied.

The new orientation of language studies promoted by Amechi Ihenacho, aimed at focusing the language programme as well as the student on eventual professional practice. This meant reducing the stress on foreign language literary classics, particularly the very early ones which required, to be understood, the study of a state of the language that is no longer in current use. It also meant the introduction of texts, literary and non literary, in the modern state of the language, particularly texts that relate to professional activities in that language.

The foreign language student is made to appreciate the need to prepare for eventual professional insertion and is exposed to the various kinds of professions that acquire the various forms of language competence which the language programme offers. This view of language studies informed the introduction, in the second year of the B.A. French programme, of courses in "Bilingual Integrated Administrative Skills" spanning two semesters and including training in Office Practice, Typing, Use of Computer, and other secretarial skills. It also informed the liberal attitude of the Language Centre towards student choice of elective courses according to their projected professional needs.

This necessarily lengthy quotation has said it all about the vision and its implementation in practical terms. It should however be added that as the years have passed since the conception and the initial practical implementation of the vision, the “Uturu School” of foreign language studies has added such other courses as Introduction to Public Administration I and II, Introduction to Government, Introduction to African Politics, Introduction to Management, Introduction to Marketing, International Relations, and Use of Igbo Language, to the Bilingual Integrated Administrative Skill I and II, as options available for equipping the student with practically applicable knowledge and skills that facilitate professional integration at the end of studies (cf. *Programme of Study, 2007* booklet of the Department of Foreign Languages and Translation Studies, Abia State University, Uturu, pp.46 – 51).

At the Department of Foreign Languages, University of Uyo, the increasingly lengthy period of unemployment experienced by graduates of the department has inspired a number of studies by this writer and his research partners (cf. Edung and Udung, 2008), Edung (2009), and (Edung and Nyah, 2010), to mention but these three). These studies essentially advocated and practically demonstrated ways of integrating French for Specific Purposes (FSP), or better still “Français de spécialité” courses into the B.A. (French) syllabus of Nigerian universities. The mode for this integration, as proposed in these studies, is the Combined Degree type of programme in which French courses will be studied alongside courses in such other disciplines as Education (which is in fact already being done in all conventional Nigerian universities), Accounting, Banking, Business management, Economics, Marketing, International Studies, Mass Communications/Journalism, Political Science, Public Administration, Music, Theatre Arts, Environmental Science/Management, Microbiology, Biochemistry, etc. While courses in other disciplines to be combined with French will take the places of courses in French Literature and African and Caribbean Literature in French in the current curriculum, the French courses will concentrate on giving the students good mastery of the French language generally, and in the specialized French language usage of the particular discipline studied together with French by a group of students. As it has been shown a number of times in the previous studies carried out by this writer, and some of which have been cited above, this curricular approach is based on the principle that we speak and master the specialized language of a discipline / profession /activity to the extent that we master the specialized concepts of that field of specialty, and not to the

extent that we master the natural language in question (Lerat, 1995:21, citing Coseriu, 1967:7). There can be little or no doubt at all that this type of curriculum will greatly enhance the employment opportunities of graduates of French in these days when versatility in terms of possession of knowledge and skills in more than one area is what one needs to stand a good chance in the labour market.

To prepare future teachers of the specialized French of the various disciplines and professions, this writer has developed and has been teaching for some years now, a postgraduate course in French for Specific Purposes (FSP). Students of this course are guided through the theoretical underpinnings that account for the characteristic or characterizing features of the professional varieties of French, and of any language for that matter, and are then trained to use tools of textual/discourse analysis to discover for themselves such features in the discourse/texts of the disciplines/fields of their interest, while intensively familiarizing themselves with the terminology and the phraseology of such disciplines or field. As their mini end-of-course projects, some students of this programme are currently working on the French language of the hospitality and tourism industry, terrorism and insurgency, trans-border crime, micro-disarmament, and environmental management and green politics, with specific attention to the local Nigerian features/content in these areas. To cite the most prominent of these studies as just one example, a Ph.D. thesis is being rounded off at the moment with the tentative title “Termes français pour designer les produits touristiques d’Akwa Ibom State (Nigeria) et les procédés de leur formation”, and with this writer as the major supervisor. Other areas in which prospective students of the programme have already indicated interest when they eventually register, are banking, management, marketing, secretaryship/office management, and sports journalism. Some of these students will certainly end up teaching FSP courses in our University and Polytechnic departments of French, while others may get other jobs in these fields because they are now functionally competent in the French language in practical career situations. To cite just one case in point here, a former student of ours successfully guided a group of pupils of an elite Nigerian secondary school on a tour of the ancient slave ports in Badagry in Nigeria and Ouidah in the Republic of Bénin. This earned him a handsome contract appointment from a Nigerian tourism company to develop a programme of similar annual holiday tours for pupils of other elite schools, and to train other tour guides with sound knowledge of French for the company. Under

his management, the company is now bringing Béninese pupils of similar elite families on a guided tour of Nigeria on yearly basis. And our former student is now a director and partner in the company that once employed him on a contract appointment.

6. Conclusion

An important point to make in conclusion of this discussion is that the employability or otherwise of graduates of French, and indeed of any discipline, can considerably determine the survival or disappearance of the discipline in the university curriculum. It is a painful fact we must admit today that only very few candidates seeking admission into the university in Nigeria make French their first choice course of study. To get a full class size, our university Departments of French must open their doors to those that Simire (2002) “ces naufragés du JAMB” (those JAMB-marooned candidates, JAMB (the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board) being the Federal Government of Nigeria agency that conducts the central university admission examination). The experience over many years has been that many of the University admission candidates who turn to and are admitted to study French are those who could not make the score, sometimes after several attempts, for admission to study “more rewarding or more marketable courses” – Accounting, Business Management, Law, Medicine, Pharmacy, Biochemistry, Microbiology, Mass Communication, Marketing, the Engineering and Technology disciplines, etc. Our French teaching Departments have become “des fourre-tout” (Simire 2002) if they are not to close shop, sending the teachers to roam the labour market themselves. One consequence of this sad development is that our graduates, who are, generally speaking, not among the bright minds from the outset (otherwise they would have been admitted at their first or second attempt at the University admission examination to study their courses of first choice), cannot even perform well in the use of the French language, a fact which also contributes to their unemployment after graduation.

This general picture of unemployment after graduation, resulting compositely from a non-functional curriculum and the admission of academically second-rate, if not third-rate materials, to study a challenging discipline which a foreign language is by all standards, continues to discourage first rate brains from studying French. No serious minded parent would readily allow the child to study a “fruitless” discipline, just as no serious minded child would. The planners of the Nigerian University French curriculum, and particularly the B.A. curriculum,

must therefore seriously re-think this issue of a non-functional curriculum which leads to long periods of unemployment for its graduates, and threatens its very survival in the University in these days of competitive budgetary allocations. The situation has been lamented for so long. The business of this essay has been to call the attention of our colleagues nationwide, and of course of our international colleagues in similar circumstances to the concrete attempts that have been made in Abia State University, Uturu, and in the University of Uyo, Uyo, both in Nigeria, and naturally invite them to seriously consider these attempts for replication, and of course with possible innovations.

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About the Author

Dr. Mike Edung is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Foreign Languages, University of Uyo, Nigeria, where he teaches courses in French Phonetics and Phonology, French Lexicology, French Stylistics, French Language in Africa, Français de spécialité, Terminology, Technical Writing, and Discourse Analysis, mostly in the M.A. and the Ph.D. programmes. He is a widely published researcher in diverse aspects of French Language and Linguistics, both in his native Nigeria and internationally. Dr. Edung is also a member of several professional and scholarly societies and associations, including the very dynamic University French Teachers' Association of Nigeria (UFTAN), and has been concerned for quite some time now, with curricular innovations in university French studies focusing on the teaching of "français de spécialité".

Contact: michaeledung@uniuyo.edu.ng or udoedung@yahoo.com