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RUSSIAN STUDIES IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES: 1965 TO THE PRESENT

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Summary

Russian Studies in Nigerian Universities has been a subject of discussion at various academic fora. This paper thus discusses the birth, growth and sustenance of Russian Studies at the Universities of Ibadan and Lagos. It further argues that as a means of national development, higher institutions in Nigeria should have a foreign, modern or European languages Department. It is further argued that language is the chief delimiting factor in any specific culture and is one of the main foci for political, economic, as well as intellectual advancements.

Key words: Russian Studies, Foreign Language Departments, University of Ibadan, and University of Lagos.

Introduction

Russian Studies has come a long way in the history of university education in Nigeria. A lot of literature on it also exists, including books, journal articles, interviews, seminars and lecture notes. (See for example, Ademakinwa (2004), Omotade (2008, 2009), Odunuga (1993, 1994, 1998) and Department of European Studies and European Languages Students' Handbook (2008, 2010, 2000), among others. It is also worth mentioning that the Russian language occupies the third position in the hierarchy of foreign or modern European languages being taught in Nigerian universities, mainly because the teaching of Russian is a relatively alien phenomenon in the African university curriculum. The French language ranks first, while the German language occupies the second

position by virtue of the colonization of African countries by France and Germany.

Russian Studies is just beginning to take its desired place in the constellation of other European languages introduced after independence in the 1960s. Hitherto, the scope of learning a foreign language has been limited, in that not much opportunity has been provided because of the colonial situation in which many African countries found themselves until after 1960. This has so much affected our Nigerian universities that they are still struggling to ward off many of the Western European traditions that still permeate their curricula in order to truly reflect on the needs of Nigeria and, generally, Africa.

It is, perhaps, in recognition of the importance of language and foreign language acquisition that Healy (1967:24), asserts that:

Language ,whether one's own or one acquired later , is a gateway to a culture, as well as a means of communication; to show students how to pass through these gateways is surely a worthwhile task, and one which our Universities must never relinquish.

This paper, therefore, investigates the history of Russian Language/Studies in Nigeria, specifically at the two major Nigerian universities where Russian is offered as a degree programme, namely University of Ibadan and University of Lagos. The paper further stresses on the need of foreign languages as an integral component of university curriculum.

The Birth of Russian Studies at the University of Ibadan, Ibadan (Nigeria)

Odunuga (2004), avers that Russian Studies had been introduced into the University of Ibadan curriculum in 1965, but that, the full degree programme commenced in 1980. Two teachers started the full degree programme namely, Professor Segun Odunuga and Dr (Mrs) Alla Fawole (a Russian) who retired as a Senior Lecturer, but is currently on a contract appointment with the university. Professor Odunuga also retired in September, 2004 after serving the Department meritoriously for well over forty years.

The introduction of Russian Studies is further articulated in the revised edition of the *Students' Handbook, Department of European Studies* (2010:01) thus;

Russian was introduced in 1965 with one lecturer to provide ancillary tuition for science and agriculture students. Further development of Russian language culminated in the creation of a full honours degree programme in 1979. Thus, by the close of the 1970s, three first-degree programmes had been fully and firmly established in the department.

The three degree programmes set up in the Faculty of Arts of the University College Ibadan (UCI), are French, German (1959/60) and Russian, (1965). It is also necessary to mention the submission of Emeritus Professor, Ayo Banjo, while delivering the keynote address at an academic conference held in honour of Professor Segun Odunuga:

Professor Segun Odunuga has pioneered the teaching of Russian at University level in this country, and this conference marks his exit from a Department in which he has worked for almost forty years and whose orientation he has helped to shape over the years. (Banjo, 2004)

In a similar vein, Omotade Kayode (2004:134), in line with Banjo's assertion states that: "Odunuga is the first Professor of Russian language, south of Sub-Saharan Africa. An awardee of the highly prestigious and contentious Pushkin medal of honour" It was therefore not by accident that he became the flagship of Russian Studies in Nigeria.

Aduke Adebayo (2004:viii), while commenting on the birth, sustenance and growth of Russian Studies in Nigeria, and specifically at the University of Ibadan, extols the virtues of Odunuga and Russian Studies, submitting that he was "the first Nigerian to study the Russian language, he started his studies at the Friendship University, Moscow in 1960. He has encouraged many Nigerians to take up the study of Russian". In view of the foregoing, it is pertinent to take an insightful look into Odunuga's contribution to the growth of Russian Studies in Nigeria.

Segun Odunuga was appointed a lecturer in the erstwhile Department of Modern Languages in March 1966, where he taught singlehandedly until 1976, when another lecturer was appointed to teach the increasing number of students. He facilitated the academic linkage programme between the Pushkin Institute, Moscow, wrote the Russian syllabi for both the University of Ibadan and the University of Lagos, and has continued to show keen interest for the language he gave birth to in Nigeria, some four decades ago (Adebayo, 2004).

Russian Studies and Modern European Languages

The Department of European Studies, formerly known as the Department of Modern European Languages, was one of the first departments created by the new University of Ibadan in 1962. *The Departmental Students' Handbook* (2008) states that:

The department adopted its present designation of 'European Studies' during the 1995/96 session. This present designation is to adequately reflect the broad focus of the department in the teaching and study of European civilization and culture, and contemporary European societies. This focus

includes not only languages and literature, but also regional histories and institutions, politics and economies, thoughts as well as European Studies.

Odunuga too has this to say:

I changed the name so as to change the orientation of the Department of European Studies. From what I envisaged, Language would be one of the core courses to be taken, but then, you must have a broad knowledge of Europe. That is why we call it European Studies. My intention is to get my students to deepen their knowledge of Europe, to widen their scope and let the market open to them. (:2004:25)

Odunuga was in a position of authority as Head of Department when he changed the nomenclature of ‘Modern European Languages’ to ‘European Studies’ after due deliberation at a Departmental meeting.

The Departmental Students’ Handbook (2010) states that the vision of the Department is to be a foremost Department providing first class knowledge in European languages, cultures and literatures for relevant development of the individual, the nation and the international community. Based on this postulation, it becomes evident that languages go beyond acquisition of basic skills in the humanities; it involves firstly, the language, culture, society, history, politics and environment such that it becomes a useful tool also for the scientists, agriculturists, social scientists and policy makers. Whoever has business in Russia should understand that the Russian Studies unit is he/her first point of call for necessary academic information and professional advice.

The revised *Departmental Handbook* (2010:02), while explaining the mission statement of the Department submits that:

The Department of European Studies which offers Bachelor’s degree programmes in French, German and Russian and also Postgraduate programmes in French, Translation and European Studies, is set to produce competitive and accomplished multilingual graduates who, in addition to English and other languages, have a good oral and written mastery of the languages offered in the Department. Furthermore, the Department aims at producing graduates who will be able to participate effectively, with their vintage multilingual competence and well-informed knowledge of transnational issues as well as of linguistics, in the administration and management of Education, Technology, Computer Science, Commerce, Industry, International Trade, Diplomacy, Information and the Civil Service.

Apart from producing Russian Studies graduates, as mentioned above, services and competent advice is also provided at the University and national level in the areas of transnational

issues, linguistics, translation/translators, interpretation/interpreters, travel and tourism and feasibility study for intended businessmen and women in Russia and Nigeria.

On her justification of a Department of European Studies that offers foreign languages, Russian being one, the *Departmental Handbook* (p,2) states thus:

For Nigeria to be an integral part of the Global Village, it is imperative for her to encourage multilingualism in all her institutions. This is a sine-qua-non for development, considering the leadership role that Nigeria plays and continues to play in international politics and diplomacy. With her population, natural resources, economic resilience and political relevance, one will definitely agree that European languages such as French, German and Russian cannot be relegated to the background. Their inclusion in the curriculum of Nigerian universities is pertinent in order to prepare and provide the much needed manpower for the development of our country and also for the sustenance of its administrative machinery.

The argument embedded above is a clarion call for the Nigerian government, stakeholders, policy makers and education enthusiasts to incorporate a foreign language department in all higher institutions as a means of educational, national and capacity development.

Russian Studies at the University of Lagos, Lagos (Nigeria)

The Department of European Languages is one of the oldest departments in the Faculty of Arts of the University of Lagos and was established in 1964. Russian, as a sub-discipline, was introduced into the young Department in 1970/71 as a minor; it later became a degree course in 1983. The first set of graduates in Russian (three) completed their degree programme during the 1986/87 academic session.

According to the *Department of European Languages Brochure*, the philosophy of Russian Language in the university curricula states that with the imperative need for Nigeria to be an integral part of the Global Village and in the context of the leadership role that Nigeria has to play in international politics and diplomacy, ...the importance of major European Languages cannot be relegated to the background in the curriculum of Nigerian Universities, whose central objective is to prepare and provide the much needed manpower for the development of our country and also for the sustenance of its administrative machinery. The Russian language as the lingua franca of the transnational language of the old Soviet Union is a world language whose impact in international politics and diplomacy, scientific researches, technology, industrial development particularly steel and the formulation as well as the exploitation of political ideologies, is universally acknowledged. Russian is therefore, one of the major world languages that Nigeria, the giant of Africa cannot afford

to ignore. (2000:5)

The Russian language programme of the University of Lagos also offers courses in Russian culture, politics, and history. Professor Odunuga said *inter alia* in an interview, “I wrote the syllabus for Russian for the University of Lagos and the Senate approved it” (2004:20). From the foregoing, one can deduce that Odunuga was the academic progenitor of Russian Studies in Nigeria.

In sum, Russian Studies is a degree course in only two federal Nigerian Universities. There should be a geographical spread for language departments, at least in Nigerian universities.

The Educational Year Abroad Programme (E.Y.A.P) at the University of Ibadan and the University of Lagos

The Educational Year Abroad Programme (E.Y.A.P), otherwise known as the immersion programme, is an integral part or year in the four – year degree Russian language course at the Universities of Ibadan and Lagos. The immersion programme is spent in Russia, at the Pushkin Institute of Russian language for both universities. It is an environmental or situational exposure with the native Russian speakers that transmutes students into the world of the Russians: their culture, historical places, the language, accent, intonation and firsthand experience of who the Russians are, and what makes them Russians. A lot of education and exposure is therefore gathered during this period, apart from class work. It further enables the students to practicalise what they have learnt in the classroom, both in Nigeria and in Russia.

Odunuga (2004:20), asserts that:

By 1980, we had started the programme and we had to go on a year abroad. Professor Olaide (then V.C) and I went to Moscow to sign the agreement for our students to go to Pushkin Institute for the Year Abroad; while we were still in Moscow, our students started arriving.

During the Soviet period, the Year Abroad Programme had been sponsored jointly by the Soviet and Nigerian government up till 1990, but when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, due to centrifugal forces and its internal ethnic dynamics, the Educational Year Abroad Programme (EYAP) was subsequently abolished due to the democratic reforms of capitalism in the new Russia, while the Nigerian government failed to take responsibility for full sponsorship.

Besides the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Educational Year Abroad Programme also witnessed a plethora of problems that prevented the students from going to Russia. Responding to a question on why he scrapped the programme, Professor Odunuga says:

I did scrap the Year Abroad Programme. I had to scrap it. The intention was to send students to Moscow for one year, then to come back and graduate...but they, (the students) were no longer coming back and graduate ...at a stage, I had no final year students anymore...what is the essence of sending them on the Year Abroad which is meant to improve their knowledge of the language and they turned it into an escape route?...Our own students for economic reasons don't come back (Odunuga, 2004:24).

Educational Year Abroad Programme; Which way Forward?

The Educational Year Abroad Programme is an integral component of any foreign language learning. This is meant to integrate the students with the owners of the language being studied and their culture. Without mincing words, the study of Russian language in Nigeria will never be comprehensive neither would it be complete without the E.Y.A.P.

Those who have benefitted from the E.Y.A.P will willingly testify to the huge difference between learning Russian with and without the E.Y. A P. The students that refused to come back after their immersion programme in Russia (and Germany, for German Studies) did so due to better conditions of living and learning abroad; more viable economy; stable and crisis-free educational calendar; and access to excellent learning conditions, such as infrastructure, language laboratory, electricity, modern and recent books, well equipped library, student and staff development programmes amongst other issues.

The University of Lagos has since found a way out of this quagmire. Although plans had been made to relocate the E.Y.A.P to Ajaokuta, where the Ajaokuta Steel Rolling Complex was situated, with Russians as principal developers of steel for the Nigerian government, but due to the shutdown of the complex (for some reasons) the plan which had reached a conclusive level, had to be abandoned. Currently, students of the University of Lagos, Russian unit are “encouraged to look for the financial whereabouts to sponsor their Year Abroad Programme in Russia, or Volgograd”. This is a welcome development that has relieved both the students and staff of the stress of having to satisfy the statutory requirements for a rewarding language immersion programme for Russian (*Department of European Languages Brochure, University of Lagos, 2000*)

A more practical approach can be applied to avoid the E.Y.A.P brain drain. Students on the E.Y.A.P should be allowed to spend a specific period of time, maybe at the first or second year in Russia, and then complete their final- year first or second semester there, so that, the issue of not returning to Nigeria is settled. This is the approach used in the language department of Ghanaian Universities where Russian is studied as a degree programme. The University of Ibadan and the

University of Lagos may have to imbibe this best practice.

Furthermore, knowledge of people and society, of the human mind and recorded human experience, of knowledge of others and, consequently, a thorough understanding of our own, is the essence of education in the humanities. It must also be mentioned that students of the Russian unit of the University of Ibadan are still in limbo as to where and how to spend their E.Y.A.P. Although rays of hope had been flashed by The Russian government towards the plight of Russian language at the University of Ibadan especially, one hopes that the promises made would come to fruition in the near future.

The Challenges of Post – Colonialism and Russian Studies in Nigerian Universities

The knowledge of Russian varies from faculty to faculty and also between individuals, but something that is common is, perhaps, this misunderstanding of referring to Russian Studies only in terms of the Russian language. This is borne probably out of ignorance of academics and the general readers who should know better.

On the challenges of post-colonialism, Dele Layiwola, in his inaugural lecture aptly titled: “*A Place Where Three Roads Meet: Literature, Culture and Society*,(2009/2010) cites Achebe (1982:550) thus:

What are the factors which have conspired to place English in the position of national language in many parts of Africa: Quite simply the reason is that these nations were created in the first place by the intervention of the British which, I hasten to add, is not saying that the peoples comprising these nations were invented by the British.

Layiwola (p,13), sheds more light on the influence of colonization by arguing that the colonial factor in language and cultural events has been a critical factor in the intellectual and artistic output of artists in Africa, Europe, the Americas, Asia and the Pacific. It is true that in Africa and Asia, the English language has always contended with indigenous languages on the school curriculum so that the question is not so much on the absence of a (mother) tongue but on the need to discover a (father’s) voice.

Ayo Banjo, in his keynote address, while asking rhetorically whether, in spite of colonization in Africa, we should still be teaching European Languages and European Studies in African Universities, answers in the affirmative by stating that a university, wherever it is in the world, is not a propaganda outfit but an institution dedicated to the disinterested pursuit of Knowledge. It so

happens that Europe looms large in the world today, dictating all the global agenda and a university would be failing in its duty if it does not continuously subject the situation to careful study and produce graduates who are able to carry on the efforts. Although Banjo further argues that it is good for us that English is the language of the United States of America, otherwise we would have been compelled to add another language to the inventory of languages to provide access to what has turned out to be the only major power in the world. However, the gap in Banjo's submission is the fact that he does not recognize the former Soviet Union as a world super power and also present Russia as same. Then, one is right in the justification of promoting Russian language/Studies in Nigeria.

The development of foreign languages in Nigeria, according to Banjo, lies rather in Nigeria's language policy. He argues that Nigeria has a language policy in education which has been properly thought out and looks nice on paper. Unfortunately, after some twenty-five years, its implementation has not been pursued with any degree of seriousness. In the policy, all the languages learnt at any level in the country are classified under three headings: indigenous Nigerian languages; English, which, at present, serves as the official language; and foreign languages, such as French, German and Russian. Apart from the fact that it appears that the subsisting language policy in education is about to be amended and made more complicated even before being given a chance to be implemented, the projected change would raise some fundamental questions about Nigeria and the World.

It is a known fact that language is a means of communication and communication is the fundamental purpose of learning any foreign language. It is also important to mention that many African countries introduced French and English (in Francophone and English speaking countries, respectively) as a matter of priority in order that communication with neighbouring countries could be easier. As a result of this, French became the dominant and most popular modern language, being taught in Nigeria and other English speaking West African countries today and, like German, Russian is still in its infancy in the university curricula.

Currently, there are relatively many secondary schools (public and private) in Nigeria where French is taught. Therefore, it is easier for the French departments to admit students with an average or good background of French into universities, while the Russian departments or units (most foreign language departments comprise two or three languages units) often look for students from among those already admitted to offer Russian as a subject. It is also easier to get secondary school French teachers and university French graduates, since it is being taught only in the universities. But in spite of this handicap, the steady progress made by Russian is encouraging.

Oladele Awobuluyi (2010), however, contends that language is uniquely a human phenomenon and that language and state or nation are inseparable. Giving credence to the above assertion, Josef Stalin, one time leader of the disintegrated Soviet Union, defines the nation as:

A nation is a historically constituted stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.

(<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nation>,pp9-10)

Specifically on the Russian language within the Soviet space, Stalin, while referring to the Russians, concluded that the Russians were “the most outstanding nation of all nations within the Soviet Union”. Stalin’s statement subsequently became a leitmotif of propaganda in the years that followed, and he made concessions to Russian nationalism rather than harnessing its emotional force and exploiting it towards a greater end (John Keep,1995)

From the aforementioned, language, in sum, serves as a means of uniquely identifying that nation and differentiating it from others in the world (Awobuluyi,2010:06).Thus, the Russian language is identified with the Russians and the Russian federation.

Russian Language: Modern, Foreign or European?

Within a given faculty, the need for foreign languages (Russian) varies; the science students need a knowledge of Russian for purposes of reading in the original technical or scientific literature related to his/her field, because quite a large amount of material, especially scientific, is published in that language and since much is always lost in translation to others, the political and economic situation of the former Soviet Union and Russian federation is so attractive that they feel compelled to study the language. Others also need the language for administrative purposes, tourism, conferences, seminars and intended study in Russia.

This apart, Russian is a language in which a considerable part of world literature is written. Most of the writers are quite known and prominent in the West, such as Tolstoi, Chekhov, Dostoyevsky and Pushkin, especially through translation. There are others whose works are still being sought after by scholars who realize that the depth of thought and the quality of the message being conveyed can only be reached in the original. Pushkin, who started the “Golden age” of Russian literature in 1825, for instance, is not as widely known as Tolstoi or Chekhov. This is not because his work is of less importance but because it has always been difficult to translate adequately from Russian into any other language. The works of the great Russian critic, Belinsky

suffers a similar fate.

However, we need to draw a line of demarcation between those who need the language for a limited purpose and those who have to use it on a much wider scale. These days, Russian is not taught purely as an academic subject, with wider contacts between African countries and the Russian federation on economic, educational, political, social and commercial levels. It stands on a tripod, as a foreign, modern and European language that has attracted the attention of various governments. In fact, the Nigerian government had to advertise undergraduate scholarships and even recruit people for courses in Moscow as interpreters and translators. This surely means that Russian, more than ever before, has become a needed language in the social, economic, cultural and political spheres of the country.

. It is, perhaps, the interconnectedness of the world and the diplomatic relationship between Russia and Nigeria that led the Russian President, Dmitry Medbedev, to make an unprecedented state visit to Nigeria on the 25th July, 2009. He was the first Russian President to visit Nigeria.

Arising from the visit of President Medbedev, Nigeria and Russia consequently signed agreements and Memoranda of Understanding (M.o.U) to boost the strategic partnership between the two nations. The agreements are; (1).Transfer of persons sentenced to imprisonment, Investment Promotion and Protection of Agreement (IPPA). (2) Cooperation in the field of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes; (3) Legal cooperation between the Nigerian and Russian ministries of justice; (4) Cooperation in the field of exploration of outer space for peaceful purposes; (5) MOU and Articles of Association on joint venture between NNPC and GAZPROM (*The Guardian*, June 25, 2009)

President Medbedev, during the bilateral talks, also agreed to expand cooperation between Russia and Nigeria on international issues as well as to strengthen Nigerian - Russian ties, in the spirit of the Declaration on the Principles of Friendly Relations and Partnership between the Russian Federation, signed in Moscow in 2001. In addition to the aforementioned, President Medbedev further stated that “many specialists will be trained in Russia for the betterment of Nigeria... as well as to strengthen Nigeria - Russian ties. (*Daily Independent*, June 25, 2009)

Graduates of Russian studies will be found useful in the continued partnership between Russia and Nigeria. Russian Studies graduates have been found employable in various strata of society both nationally and internationally, in oil companies, aviation industry, the academia, the armed forces, paramilitary bodies, diplomatic service, international organisations and the banking sector. Graduates of Russian Studies with a first degree can also further their studies in postgraduate programmes in the humanities and social sciences in Nigerian and foreign universities.

Conclusion

With Russia's continued desire to extend its economic presence in Nigeria, Nigeria needs to diversify its defence industry and Russia is well placed to fulfil this urgent and desirable quest. Besides, Nigeria, being a large industrial market, can provide Russian businessmen and businesswomen with profitable business opportunities that can engage graduates of Russian Studies in Nigeria and Russia. (see *Advancing Nigerian-Russian Relations in the 21st^t century*, 2004)

In this connection, therefore, it is recommended that, to enable the services of Russian lecturers reach a wider audience, non-language courses in other departments should be taught by experts in Russian Studies. It might be said that some courses, such as Political and Economic Geography of Russia, Russian History and Politics be handled by specialists in those fields, but the truth is that, since it is the interest of universities to make maximum use of the present teachers of Russian, these teachers should help widen the scope and knowledge in such courses mentioned above.

Russian Studies, in spite of its present low but appreciating status in Nigerian and African universities curricula, is a course that has good reasons to spread, as demonstrated in this paper. Once it is introduced into higher institution curricula, it will take its desired place, alongside French and German, as a foreign, modern and European language.

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