

# FOUR DECADES OF TEACHING RUSSIAN LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA; SETBACKS AND PROSPECTS

Chuka Chukwube

*Department of European Languages,  
University of Lagos (NIGERIA)  
chukachukwube@yahoo.com*

## Abstract

The study of Russian Language in Nigeria dates back to 1960, when the University of Nigeria Nsukka was established and the course introduced, first, as a minor, and later, as a full degree course. Shortly after, it was introduced at the University of Ibadan and like at Nsukka, as a subsidiary, and later, a degree course. The spread reached the University of Lagos in 1970. Ever since then, many other universities have signified interest in the course among which was the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University), which unfortunately could not progress with the course after a short time.

The aim of the study is to explore into the nitty-gritty of the teaching of the course vis-a-vis universities currently offering the subject. students enrolment, availability or otherwise of lecturers, students; encouragement etc.

Keywords: Russian Language, study, major course, subsidiary, university.

## RUSSIAN LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA

The study of Russian language in Nigeria is as old as the country's independence; when the University of Nigeria, Nsukka was established. Like some other newly introduced courses, it started as a minor but later became a full degree course. And as a new discipline, it started with only six students who were bold to explore into the seeming "strange" area of study. This is because, hitherto, only English and French were familiar languages studied in primary and secondary schools respectively. Even at that, the six students that started with the course, registered at subsidiary and were students from various departments. It was much later that the language became a full discipline.

As a result of successful introduction of the course at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, the authorities of the University of Ibadan equally introduced it, and like at Nsukka, it was not a degree awarding course. And like at Nsukka too, the patronage was very low as very few students, mainly out of curiosity and the zeal delved into this unknown terrain of academic adventure.

Having succeeded at Nsukka and Ibadan, the study of the course spread to the University of Lagos and to the then University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University). Russian as a sub-discipline was added into the Department of European Languages, University of Lagos in 1970/71 academic session, first, as a minor, but in 1983, it became a full-fledged degree programme (Ade-Ojo 2006). The first set of graduates in Russian, who were three, completed their degree programme at the end of the 1986/87 session. The number has been on the increase in subsequent years. In 2003/2004 session alone, 34 students were admitted. Presently, the Department has 53 students studying Russian language. It is expected that the students' population will further increase in subsequent sessions. While this could be said about the University of Lagos, it was not a success story at the Obafemi Awolowo University, where the course went moribund no sooner it was established, no thanks to dearth of qualified lecturers to handle the course.

## WHY STUDY RUSSIAN LANGUAGE?

The imperativeness of studying Russian language in the modern day Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. There is need for Nigeria to be an integral part of the Global Village in which multilingualism is a sine-qua non and in the context of the leadership role that Nigeria has to play in international politics and diplomacy, by virtue of her population, natural resources, economic resilience and political relevance, 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 the country and also for the sustenance of its administrative machinery. The Russian language, as the lingua franca or 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.

Science students need a knowledge of Russian for purposes of reading in the original 'technical' or 'scientific' literature related to their field, since a large amount of materials are published in the language and since much is often lost in translation.

Apart from being beneficial to science students, it is also vital to arts students and lovers of literature. While it is true that great names in Russian literatures are known in the West through translation (Tolstoy, Chekhov, Dostoyevsky etc.), there are others whose works are still being sought after by scholars realizing that the depth of thought and message 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 Tolstoy and Chekhov' (Odunuga 2005). This is not because his work is of less importance, but because it has always been difficult to translate him adequately from Russian.

Going beyond learning Russian as an academic subject and for a limited purpose, there are those who have to use the language on a wider scale. Epitomizing on globalization that depicts the world as a village, there is today a wider contacts between Africa and Russia in areas of economy, education, commerce and culture which has necessitated and attracted the interest of both the federal and some state governments of Nigeria to encourage many of its citizens to sponsored programmes. This is expected to yield the needed professionals in different areas of specialization, including interpreters and translators for the country.

## **PROGRAMME OF RUSSIAN LANGUAGE IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES**

The Russian language in Universities in Nigeria is a four year programme designed that three years of the programme is done in Nigeria while one year emersion programme is done in any recognised university or institute in Russia. Going by this arrangement, students spend years one and two in departments in Nigeria while third year is abroad and the fourth year is completed in Nigeria. At inception of the courses in different universities, admission rate was low with sometimes not more than three candidates admitted as in the case of the University of Lagos in 1982/83 session. This, however, changed tremendously with time as earlier indicated.

The benefits of the emersion programme cannot be over emphasized. According to Odunuga (1981), as a result of an agreement signed in the 80s by the then Vice Chancellor of the University of Ibadan, Professor S. Olajuwon Olayide with the then Director of the Pushkin Institute of Russian Language, Moscow, Professor V. G. Kostomarov, students of the University of Ibadan had the privilege of having the emersion programme in the institute. They were later joined by their colleagues from the University of Lagos to form the contingent from Nigeria in the institute. As contained in the agreement, all travelling expenses, including tuition and other learning materials were provided to the students by the Soviet authorities at no cost. Apart from that, students received monthly stipend from the government for their up-keep. All these support, however, ceased with the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the inability of both the University of Ibadan and the Pushkin Institute to renew their agreement. That witnessed a period of students spending their four years in the Departments of their Universities without the emersion programme. This was so till the year 2005 when a sort of understanding was reached with the authorities of Volgograd State Technical University to enable students of the University of Lagos to do their programme in the University. This necessitated reaching of mutual understanding between the Russian Unit of the Department of European Languages, University of Lagos and its counterpart from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka which makes it possible for students of both universities to study in Volgograd for the emersion programme. The University of Ibadan is still grappling with their students having the four year programme in the university.

## **PROSPECTS OF RUSSIAN LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA**

It is important to note that Nigerian students have benefited immensely from the two institutions in Russia. Apart from the one year programme for undergraduate students, the Pushkin Institute has succeeded in training a couple of Nigerian students at Masters and Doctorate levels. These Nigerians presently constitute the bulk of teaching staff of the language both at the University of Lagos and Ibadan. All these, unfortunately, ended with the disintegration of the Soviet Union. It is now a herculean task for many parents to send their children or wards to study in Russia as the cost of tuition and maintenance of each student in conservatively put at \$6,000 including transport cost. In reacting

to this, the universities of Nigeria, Nsukka and the University of Lagos have now made it voluntary to embark on the project. Students who cannot afford such amounts are allowed to spend their four years in their departments.

Another landmark in the study of Russian in Nigeria is the efforts of the National University Commission (NUC) to modify and draw Benchmark Academic Standard for Postgraduate Programme in Russian Languages in Nigerian Universities. This is a welcome development and the University of Lagos is counting on this opportunity to establish its postgraduate programme in Russian. It is expected that the University of Nigeria will also utilize the opportunity. It is important to note that hitherto, Russian is studied at postgraduate level only at the University of Ibadan.

## **PROBLEMS OF STUDYING RUSSIAN LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA**

Looking at the progress already made in this field of study in the last fifty years, Russian language in Nigeria is embedded with some noticeable bottlenecks. In the first place, it is unspeakable that after fifty years of teaching Russian in Nigeria, the expected awareness of the curriculum is yet to be achieved. Russian as a course still remains strange to many Nigerians, including the so-called elite. Students who study the course sometimes feel ashamed to identify with the course and oftentimes claim to be studying other courses instead. Ignorance of the marketability of the course is another factor. And because in many instances, the bulk of students admitted to study the course are those who failed to meet up with the requirements of their courses of first choice, such students feel inferior to other of their contemporaries, especially at the beginning of their studies, but regain full confidence at the later stage. To check this therefore, a lot of awareness needs to be created and the onus falls on both the lecturers and the students. Efforts must be made by the lecturers to communicate even outside the classroom setting in the language among themselves and with the students who are at the later stage of their studies. This will help the students build confidence in themselves and be proud to be associated with the course. Students themselves must try to always communicate in the language not minding the obvious mistakes they could make.

The dearth of teachers of the course has been hindering the growth of the course and consequently, the spread of the language to the nooks and crannies of the Nigeria. This also brought about the extinction of Russian language no sooner than it was created at the University of Ife. Another instance is the University of Nigeria, Nsukka which for a long time had only one lecturer teaching the course. Ade-Ojo (2006) posits that till early 90s, the University of Lagos had only two lecturers teaching the course. The University of Ibadan was better than the others in terms of lecturers, apparently, because of the University authority's earlier contact with the Pushkin Institute in Moscow, and by extension, some organisations such as the Nigeria-Russia Friendship Association, which was determined to assist individuals or organizations in getting good links with the Soviet authorities and agencies. It could be recalled that the NRFA and the Cooperative Association sponsored many Nigerians individually and as delegates to study in the Soviet Union. In Nigeria today, about 90% of the lecturers of Russian language are products of the Pushkin Institute either at undergraduate or at graduate level. Today, however, the University of Ibadan can boast of five qualified lecturers teaching the course. The same is at the University of Lagos where four lecturers are on ground while one is in Volgograd in pursuance of his doctorate degree. The University of Nigeria has since increased its staff strength. This does not, however, imply that it is Eldorado already as the total numbers of Russian lecturers in Nigeria is a far cry from the needed number. All the three universities are now scouting for lecturers not only to be able to gain the mandatory accreditation of National University Commission (NUC) but to be able to handle the anticipated increase in the admission rate of the universities. The intention of the National University Commission to enforce the introduction of postgraduate course on the language in Nigerian universities calls for engaging more lecturers in the field.

Adequate provision of teaching aids has always been a problem in Nigerian universities. None of the three universities teaching Russian can boast of well equipped language laboratory and library for the course. Where available, books are very old with no availability of modern journals. None of the departments has computers with Russian keyboards, video sets, DVD sets, cassette players and films. Although the University of Lagos is now determined to overhaul the entire system, similar efforts in the past yielded only minor results. And the extent of efforts of other universities are yet to be determined.

Another nagging setback in the study of Russian in Nigerian Universities is the emersion programme. Because of the astronomical cost of sending students on the programme, which is entirely borne by

the parents of the students involved, many students shun from the travel thereby denying themselves the obvious benefits. This consequently increases the task of few available lecturers in the departments.

In the past, there was a Russian Cultural Centre in Lagos that had quite reasonable number of modern electronic materials that were used in projecting the culture of the country. The library of the centre was made available to students and the reading public. Historical and cultural films were shown at the centre during Russian public holidays and students were opportuned to take advantage of it. The Centre went moribund even before the disintegration of the Soviet Union. It is, however, heart-warming to hear that the Russian Embassy in Nigeria is fully prepared to link the University of Lagos with a non-profit making organization in Russia – Ruskiy Mir with a view to facilitating international linkage and establishing a new centre in the University of Lagos. The Department of European Languages of the University is in tandem with the Vice Chancellor, Professor A. B. Sofoluwe in working hard to actualize the project. It is believed that students of Russian in the university would be the direct beneficiary while students from the other universities would not be left out.

Russian lecturers in the past used to go to the Pushkin Institute in Moscow for refresher courses for a period of one to two months in summer. It was sponsored by the then Soviet government. The importance of this can only be imagined. The exercise was long stopped and MAPRIAL, an umbrella that unified and occasionally assembled teachers of Russian language all over the world is either extinct or less heard about in Nigeria. The effect of this is that Russian lecturers are less exposed and entirely out of tune with the dynamics of teaching the language. This is detrimental to the students and it retards the pace of growth of the language in the country.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The aforementioned setbacks in the learning of the language call for solutions. The growth and spread of the language in Nigeria, and indeed, in Africa should not be the paramount concern of the individual universities alone but also, the Russian government. It is always the pride of speakers of a language to see such languages spread and since both countries benefit from the learning of the language, it calls for the joint efforts to uplift the language. The Russian government should increase the number of its annual scholarship awards to Nigerians and a reasonable percentage allocated to the study of the language. On its part, Nigerian government should encourage the respective universities through better funding and sponsorship of some programmes related to the teaching of the language such as conferences and seminars. The Russian government can still afford to send experts to the Nigerian Universities and once again bring back the course to vibrancy.

The Russian government can also through some agencies and organisations donate recent books and other teaching aids to these universities as it had once done. Such gestures would spur the students towards more dedication and confidence. At the same time, Russian authorities can help to defray part of the expenses incurred by the students in the emersion programme. The University of Lagos has started thinking in that direction.

The summer courses for Russian language teachers should be reintroduced in Nigeria and sponsored by concerned authorities of the countries. This will boost the moral of teachers and make them globally compliant. New entrants will be attracted into the profession and lecturers of the course would see themselves as being equal to the challenges.

New associations or organisations that would act as an umbrella unifying teachers of the language should be formed, and if possible, at international level. And where the formation of new ones seems impossible, efforts must be made by the lecturers to identify themselves with the existing ones. It could be recalled that in 1972, teachers of Russian agreed that regular seminars and symposia be arranged on a West African level and in the Accra Congress of West African Modern Languages Association (WAMLA) in 1977, teachers of Russian formally inaugurated the West African Association of Teachers of Russian. There is also MAPRYAL – the world Association of Russian Language Teachers. Teachers of Russian in Nigeria should endeavour to see that the possible benefits of these associations do not elude them.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study of Russian language in Nigeria has gone through thin and thick in the past four decades. For the language to have survived in the country in the last fifty years under the aforementioned setbacks is commendable. There is no doubt that the language has come to stay in Nigeria as it is currently maintaining third position after English and French among foreign languages studied in

Nigeria. It is our convictions that when the suggested steps are taken to promote the language; Russian will ever remain relevant and greatly sorts for. With this in view, Nigerian universities are irrevocably committed to the teaching of Russian language with competence, creativity, resourcefulness, dynamism and total dedication.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Ade-Ojo, S. (2006) *Department of European Languages, University of Lagos Brochure*. Lagos: Samoh Onakoya Nig. Ent. Ltd.
- [2] Odunuga, S. (1981) "Russian in Nigerian Universities" in *West African Studies in Modern Language Teaching and Research*. Ed. Ayo Banjo. Pp. 52-57.
- [3] Odunuya, S. (2005) "Russian in Nigerian Universities". In *Nigerian the Foreign Language Question*. Ed. Tunde Ajiboye. Pp. 135-140.