

# Foreign Languages for Specific Purposes and Sustainable Human Development in Africa

**Owoeye Tuesday**

*Department of Languages, Covenant University, Ota, Ogun State, Nigeria*

E-mail: owoeye2005@yahoo.com

Tel: +234-80502-79048

## **Abstract**

It would not be preposterous to opine that language and communication play a paramount role in the quest for development, be it human, social, political, technological and any other form of development. A paramount role because knowledge, which is the life wire of any development effort, is acquired through information. Information comes through communication powered by language. Looking at Africa as a continent, the plurality of official languages or languages of instruction, through which information flows, undoubtedly constitutes a barrier to effective human development processes. It is based on this background that this paper aims at exploring the concept of Foreign Languages for Specific Purposes (FLSP), a paradigm of human development, which has not been optimally activated in African educational settings, as against what obtains in the developed world. The paper begins by defining the concept of Language for Specific Purposes (LSP), goes further to critically analyse the dividends of international bilingualism and the possible impact of the learning of FLSP on sustainable human development in Africa. To conclude, the paper recommends various practical and pragmatic approaches, which include the establishment of FLSP centers in African universities and other equivalent institutions of higher learning, as steps towards the optimal activation of the concept in the continent.

**Keywords:** Language for Specific Purposes, Sustainable Human Development, Foreign Languages, Africa

## **1. Introduction**

Language is one of the most important areas of human development. Human communication skills constitute the major characteristic that distinguishes him from other living things. More importantly, these skills are also what bring human beings together. Human development can only be sustained when people, individually and collectively, are exposed to new and greater opportunities that result in human potential realization. However, new opportunities arise only when human beings communicate with one another. For any meaningful and sustainable development, therefore, access to information is paramount. Meanwhile the main channel of information flow is communication thereby making communication a preeminent factor in developmental efforts. If effective communication is the taproot of development, then language related issues could not be toyed with since language enjoys the *sine qua non* position in communication. Furthermore, language proficiency is considered to be a human capital and one can not ignore the fact that human capital development is a current need among African citizens today. It is on the fore-going that we think any serious discourse on sustainable human development in Africa should take into account the linguistic paradigm. In this paper, we shall be

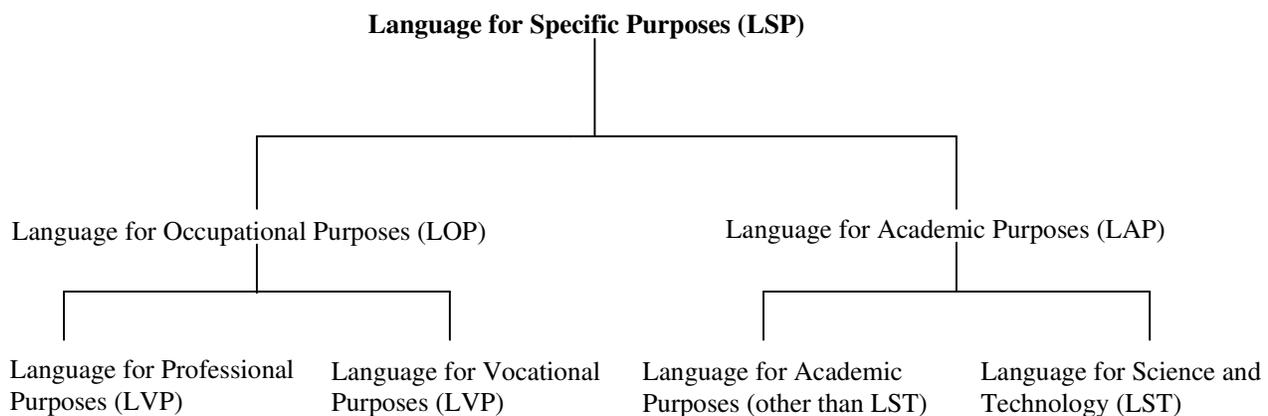
discussing a dimension of language learning known as Language for Specific Purposes (henceforth LSP). Our focus shall be on the foreign languages such as English, French, and Portuguese which have acquired the status of official languages in Africa.

This paper begins by defining the concept of LSP, goes further to discuss Foreign Languages for Specific Purposes (Henceforth FLSP) and also looks at the benefits of the latter to sustainable human development in Africa. The paper ends with recommendations on how the concept of FLSP can be optimally activated in African higher institutions.

## 2. Defining LSP

Defining LSP is better embarked upon through the various works done in the area of English for Specific Purposes (Henceforth ESP). The concept began and was limited to English language for several years before experts and theorists in other languages began to look at that direction. In fact, ESP dominates the available literature on LSP. The reason for this scenario might not be unconnected to the hegemonic status of English as the most widely distributed language of the world.

The term LSP is actually an umbrella term that applies to several different categories of language learning and teaching, which differ according to the learner's needs. The categorization of ESP provided by Robinson (1991) is adopted here to serve as a model for the categorization of LSP:



The above schema encompasses two types of instruction: Language for Occupational Purposes (LOP) and Language for Academic Purposes (LAP). While teaching Language for Occupational Purposes is targeted at individuals, such as pilots, hotel personnel, immigration officers, etc., who need particular languages to perform on the job, Language for Academic Purposes, on the other hand, is taught to students with the germane objective of equipping them with the common study skills, such as academic writing, listening to lectures, note-taking, making oral presentations in specific languages, in order that they may succeed in academic settings where languages different from their mother tongue or official languages are used for academic instructions. Specifically, LOP branches off into Language for Professional Purposes (LPP) and Language for Vocational Purposes (LVP). LAP, on its own part, is subdivided into Language for Science and Technology (LST) and LAP other than LST. This model, which can be applied to any language, clearly underscores the need for language teaching, which are aimed at satisfying specific needs of the learner.

Writing specifically about ESP, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) identify two key historical periods that gave birth to the teaching of LSP. According to them, the end of the Second World War heralded an era of unprecedented expansion in scientific, technical and economic activities on an international scale and as a result of the economic power of the United States, English became an invincible international language of science and economy. The second key period, as suggested by Hutchinson and Waters, has to do with the linguistic revolution in the late 1960s and the early 1970s.

During this period, a lot of researches were conducted on the ways in which language is used in real communication settings. With various and significant discoveries in the variables of English usage, the need to teach the specific 'Englishes' along side the traditional general English arose. If language in different situations varies, then structuring language instruction to meet the needs of learners in specific contexts is plausibly desirable. Consequently, English for Science and Technology (EST), the oldest form of LSP, came to life in the late 1960s and the early 1970s. Looking at it from the foregoing, one could clearly see why English has to dominate the other languages in the learning of LSP right from inception till date. Having illuminated the circumstances that gave birth to this paradigm of language teaching and learning, there is need to discuss the basic characteristics that make it different from the teaching and learning of Language for General Purposes (Henceforth LGP).

In attempts to distinguish between LSP and LGP, Experts in the field of ESP which include Strevens (1988), Anthony (1997) and Dudley-Evans & St. John (1998) have commonly identified four absolute and seven variable characteristics of ESP which we shall adopt here as the basic characteristics of LSP:

### **I. Absolute characteristics of LSP**

- (1) Designed to meet specified needs of the learner.
- (2) Relates in content (i.e. in its themes and topics) to particular disciplines, occupations and activities.
- (3) Centers on the language (grammar, lexis, register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities.
- (4) Makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves;

### **II. Variable Characteristics**

- (1) Restricted as to the language skills to be learned (e.g. reading only).
- (2) Not taught according to any pre-ordained methodology.
- (3) May be related to or designed for specific disciplines.
- (4) May use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of general language.
- (5) Likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation. It could, however, be for learners at secondary school level.
- (6) Generally designed for intermediate or advanced students.
- (7) Most courses assume some basic knowledge of the language system, but it can be used with beginners.

Drawing from the source, which is ESP, several languages of the world are now having their own version of LSP. Thus, we now have French for Specific Purposes (FSP), German for specific Purposes (GSP), Arabic for Specific Purposes (ASP), Spanish for Specific Purposes (SSP), Portuguese for Specific Purposes (PSP) etc. Since our study is aimed at sustainable human development in Africa through a systematic approach to the teaching and learning of the languages of research and instructions in the continent, our focus shall henceforth be on the foreign languages that enjoy official status in African countries. Most essentially, we shall be discussing the relevance of these languages to human capital development among African citizens.

## **3. FLSP and Sustainable Human Development in Africa**

In terms of the deposition of natural resources, Africa is considered to be the richest continent on earth and this has led to the irony of Africa being a rich continent inhabited by the poorest people in the world. If Africa is blessed with various natural resources while her people are predominantly still very poor then her human resources paradigm must be responsible. We are of the opinion that the most

prominent factor militating against sustainable development in Africa today is the low quality of her people's human capital. In attempts to discuss African underdevelopment, the tendencies have been to calculate the GDP, the GNP, the Income per capita and other economic indicators while largely ignoring the human capital angle of development. And even where the human capital is discussed, as noted by Prah (1993) and Bodomo (1996b), the linguistic and socio-cultural dimensions are often marginalized. If human capital development is critical to sustainable development in Africa, it goes without saying that language issues must be taken into considerations. The recognition of the potency of language as a human capital per excellence has led to the development of an interdisciplinary field known as Language Economics bringing together in a common platform economists and linguists (Schultz, 1962). Chiswick (2008:2) defines it as "*the study of the determinants and consequences of language proficiency using the methodology and tools of economics.*" Since the advent of this emerging field of study, many theoretical and empirical works have been carried out to authenticate the noble place of language skills and proficiency in the microeconomic status of individuals (Marschak, 1965; Carliner, 1981; McManus; Trainer, 1988; Grin, 1996, 2003 Bruthiaux, 2003, Chiswick, 2008). Language proficiency is a human capital because it is characterized by the three indicators of human capital: it is productive, costly to produce, and embodied in the person. Having established the status of language proficiency as a human capital, suffice is to say that the learning of relevant foreign languages by Africans will not only boost the quality of their human capital but will equally help in the sustainable human development that is dearly needed in the continent in this 21<sup>st</sup> century.

With focus on the need to develop the human capital base of the Africans through language proficiency, there have been several researches aimed at suggesting a language policy for Africa nations (Bamigbose, 1991, 2003; Hurskainen, 1993; Bodomo, 1996; Kinge'i, 1999; Teferra, 2003; Mohochi, 2003, 2005). These works among others have dwelt largely on the need to develop African national languages unto a status that will make them become languages of research and instructions in schools from primary to tertiary levels. The argument in support of this position has been that the continued use of inherited languages of the colonial masters – English, Portuguese and French – has constituted an impediment to accelerated development in the continent. According to Bodomo (1996) for instance, only a very few Africans speak the inherited languages of the colonial masters thereby shutting the larger percentage of Africans out from participating in the development process of their countries since they do not speak the languages that are used for research and instruction.

While one cannot ignore the relevance of African national and local languages in the quest for sustainable development in the continent, it should also be noted that the case of national and local languages in Africa is a peculiar one. Of the 6703 languages of the world as presented by Grimes (1996), 81% are spoken in Africa, Asia and the Pacific. By implication, there are too many national and local languages in Africa. In Nigeria alone for instance, there are about 350 mother tongues. This being the case, it becomes very difficult to arrive at a particular language of wider communication among these languages. For mutual understanding, which is an important ingredient of sustainable human development, a country is supposed to have a language that is acceptable to every section constituting it. This is where the foreign languages imposed by colonialism come in. These languages – English, French and Portuguese – are today the major official languages spoken in African countries. These are the languages that have abundance of literature which contain information relevant to development and capacity building. These are the languages serving as working languages for African international organizations. Apart from being the major African official languages, English and French rank high in the ladder of the internationally most relevant languages of the world. Though he supports the development of African local and national languages to a state where some of them could become languages of instruction not only at the primary and secondary levels but also at higher education level, Teferra (2003) suggests that the foreign languages which enjoy the status of official languages in Africa should be vigorously taught and encouraged in African educational settings. It must be stated at this point that this paper does not intend to discourage the teaching and learning of African local languages, what it aims at doing most essentially is to draw the attention of stakeholders in African

human development to the benefits derivable from the acquisition of a working knowledge of the foreign languages which are today *de jure* and *de facto* the languages of instructions in African schools. In fact we are of the opinion that the teaching and learning of both the national languages and the foreign languages in Africa should be encouraged. This scenario presents Africans with greater opportunities since the higher the number of languages one understands, the higher and the more qualitative his or her human capital will be. The knowledge of an additional language, especially an international language, cannot and should not be seen to be a disadvantage but an asset.

Frantz (1996) enumerates 17 benefits the knowledge of a foreign language can bring to a person. We have modified the seventeen benefits here by condensing it to 15 having knocked out 2 which we consider repetitive. The acquisition of a foreign language, according to him,

- (1) broadens one's experiences and expands someone's view of the world.
- (2) encourages critical reflection on the relation of language and culture, language and thought.
- (3) fosters an understanding of the interrelation of language and human nature.
- (4) develops one's intellect and teaches him how to learn.
- (5) teaches and encourages respect for other peoples.
- (6) contributes to cultural awareness and literacy, such as knowledge of original texts.
- (7) builds practical skills (for travel or commerce or as a tool for other disciplines).
- (8) improves the knowledge of one's own language through comparison and contrast with the foreign language.
- (9) exposes someone to modes of thought outside of one's native language.
- (10) fosters a sense of relevant past, both cultural and linguistic.
- (11) balances content and skill (rather than content versus skill).
- (12) expands opportunities for meaningful leisure activity (travel, reading, viewing foreign language films).
- (13) contributes to achievement of national goals, such as economic development or national security.
- (14) contributes to the creation of someone's personality.
- (15) enables the transfer of training (such as learning a second foreign language).

Taking a critical look at the benefits listed above, one could suggest that an African with the knowledge of an additional international foreign language is better positioned to succeed at work and in life than another African who is just internationally monolingual. An internationally bilingual person appears to have more access to information than someone who is competent only in one international language. Learning a foreign language, like travel, is a veritable avenue to broaden one's horizons. It lubricates opportunities not only in one's vocation or profession but also in one's intellectual potential and ability to share and work with others. With the gale of globalization becoming the order of the day, people are increasingly realizing the need to be in touch with realities expressed in the languages and cultures of other people in the world. There is, today, an increased awareness of global interdependence and multilateral needs and Africans cannot afford to be disintegrated from these global human realities.

Apart from the above-mentioned dividends accruable to the learner of a foreign language, many investigations in bilingual education and cognitive psychology also suggest that foreign language study stimulates the cognitive development of the brain (Peal and Lambert, 1962; Diaz, 1983; Commins, 1984; McLaughlin, 1984; Weatherford (1986). Peal and Lambert (1962:20), for instance, found out that a person with experiences in two cultures has an advantage over another person with a monolingual experience. According to them:

Intellectually his experience with two language systems seems to have left him with a mental flexibility, a superiority in concept formation, a more diversified set of mental abilities. . . . In contrast,

the monolingual appears to have a more unitary structure of intelligence which he must use for all types of intellectual tasks.

This singular discovery has led some researchers to speculate that bilinguals may have acquired some language abilities inherent in their bilingualism that enables them to possess higher mental flexibility. Coupled with the fact that people who understand more than one language and culture can communicate and relate more conveniently with people of other nationalities and cultures, it is presumably possible that through the learning of another language and culture, people become more effective solution-providers especially in the area of pressing social problems. This is made possible because learners of other international languages will automatically be exposed to a wider variety of solution-providing mechanisms. Africa is regarded as a third world continent, not because she is lacking in natural resources, but because the continent is bereft of quality solution-providing minds. If the acquisition of additional languages brings about higher mental flexibility, then the learning of FLSP by African professionals will be a good thing in the continent.

#### 4. Conclusion

It is our belief that the major challenge facing Africa in this 21<sup>st</sup> century is that of human development. Countries that are regarded as developed today were able to attain that status because they have qualitative human capacity base. For Africa to join this committee of developed continents, several developmental approaches have to be deployed. In our candid opinion, foreign language learning for specific purposes is an area that needs to be explored in Africa educational settings. We are recommending a situation where French for Specific Purposes is pursued with vigour in Anglophone African countries while English for Specific Purposes is encourage to flourish in Francophone countries of Africa. These two languages, though foreign in Africa, are the two major official languages in Africa. They are also the two major languages of instructions and languages of wider communication in African continent. It will be a good omen for human development in Africa if each university could establish a center for foreign languages for specific purposes.

With the existence of these centers, many African professionals will be availed the opportunity of a foreign language as it relates to their professions. Information needs to flow among Africans if reasonable development is to be in view. But with the plurality of official languages which double as languages of research and instructions in Africa, there is still a conspicuous barrier to information flow among Africans. This barrier will reduce drastically if African professionals are able to communicate with one another.

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