

## FRENCH LANGUAGE: A PROBABLE TOOL FOR THE REALISATION OF THE CHANGE AGENDA.

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### *Abstract*

*This paper highlights the importance of the French language to the 'Change Agenda' as declared by the All Progressives Congress (APC) government led by President Muhammadu Buhari. The life of decadence, insecurity and economic hardship, that has continuously encumbered Nigerians, has led to the clamour for change and transformation from the life of poverty and corruption bequeathed by erstwhile governments. Howbeit, ignorance of the importance of the French language, could shortchange the success of the Change Agenda. Also, lack of communication, due to language barrier, could also jeopardize the Agenda Plans on economy and security, since we are surrounded by francophone nations. This paper recommends the acquisition of proficiency in the French language and government's participation in the development of the language as possible panacea to the problems of employment and insecurity in the nation.*

**Keywords:** *Change, Government, French, Francophone Neighbours, Language Acquisition.*

### **Introduction**

The debilitating economic, employment, security, corruption and infrastructural problems assailing the nation, have made the All Progressives Congress (APC) led government of President Muhammadu Buhari to declare a five-point agenda as alleviation for the ailing sectors of the nation. Though not properly itemized under the agenda, yet the problems surrounding educational advancement in the nation are myriad.

According to Phillip (2006) "If Nigeria must witness change in the real sense the most potent weapon to be deployed is education." The present government was indeed left a dysfunctional education sector, owing

to years of nepotism and corruption by former governments. Higher institutions churn out graduates whose use and mastery of language is embarrassingly appalling. The Buhari led government has promised to change this situation. From the very first budget, it sent a whopping 403.16 billion naira into the education sector and has promised to recruit 500,000 graduates to teach at the primary school level. Hopefully, this would help in repairing the language use problems at the secondary and tertiary levels (Phillip, 2016).

This paper looks at the possible contributions of the French language to the Change Agenda. It recognises the challenges facing the acquisition of the French language in Nigeria and suggest also solutions to the problems.

## **French Language**

According to Yekini (2006), French language is “the maternal language of France and which is the official language of many countries worldwide. It belongs to the Romance group of Indo-European languages that developed from Latin, spoken by about 300 million people”.

## **Change Agenda**

One of the many meanings of the word change according to the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (2010) includes;

To become different or to make somebody or something different. Also, it is to pass or make somebody or something or something pass from one state or form into another.

It defines the word ‘Agenda’ as ‘A plan that lists all the work that you have to do and when you must do each thing.’ Macmillan Dictionary online also defines the word ‘agenda’ as ‘all the things that need be done or that need be thought about or solved.’

Therefore, from the general perspective of an average Nigerian, Change Agenda would be a plan to make situations of Nigerians different by improving their living conditions, through an itemised plan of the government. It is expected from the definitions, that subject to government’s deliberations and operations, Nigerians would experience improvement in their lives. The populace expects that, through its commitment to a well-defined plan that touches vital sectors and aspects of governance, government would cause the populace to go into the state of prosperity, security and educational development. It is expected in change that there be a transformation that leads to advancements, since change is synonymous with transformation and development (Alabi, 2016).

Alabi (2016) citing Dike (2000) defines change as ‘a significant alteration of social structures. Social structures meaning ‘pattern of social action and interaction which include norms, values, and cultural phenomena.’ The principal objective of the French language in the Nigeria Certificate in Education Minimum Standards for Languages (2012), is to make communication easier for Nigerians and for inter-communication

with our francophone neighbours such as The Republic of Benin, Cameroon, Niger and Chad. Language has often been associated with National development. According to Ladan (2006):

For any nation to achieve peace, progress, and development of her resources for the benefit of her citizens there is a need to have a common medium of expression, where the government and the masses could effectively communicate. The only means this could happen is through language.

In addition, inter-communication with our neighbouring countries is also vital to national development. It is in this light that president Muhammadu Buhari visited Benin Republic thrice (August, December, 2015, January, 2016), Niger Republic and Chad in June and Cameroon in July 2015 (Feranmmie, 2016). In the midst of these visitations, is the Change Agenda, which the president and his cabinet state as a five-point agenda, which was presented in the online newspaper The Nation (2015) as thus;

1. Change in the nation's dependence on crude oil to earn revenue.
2. Provision of mass employment.
3. Provision of adequate security.
4. Fight against corruption.
5. Improvement of infrastructure and good healthcare.

As much as the use of language can be associated with everyone of these points listed here under the Change Agenda, this paper would highlight the importance of the French language to the provision of employment and security. The French language in its economic lucrateness, boasts of numerous career applications and commercial values.

### **French language as a source of employment**

The francophone countries surrounding Nigeria provide special job opportunities for Nigerians who are skilled and bi-lingual. Aside this, proficiency in the French language is an added advantage, when seeking jobs with the Immigrations, customs, ministry of external affairs, the armed forces and other security agencies. Also, teaching, lecturing, broadcasting and journalism, translating and interpreting, provides a steady stream of jobs around information, communication and knowledge. Often, jobs as bi-lingual secretary in foreign desks of firms, banks and oil companies are among much sought after jobs. One could also work as expatriate outside Nigeria, even with religious missions. These are all probable options for a person literate in the French language. There are also world-class positions in Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and international intuitions and organisations such as Secretary-General of the United Nations. Ambassadorial positions and jobs in consulates, UN, UNESCO, ECOWAS and others (Ademola, 2013, Yekini, 2001). France as a nation itself provides job opportunities home and abroad for skilled labour that is literate in the French language, even in Nigeria (Salaam, 2006).

The government would do well to encourage proficiency in the language, in order to alleviate the unemployment problem in the nation. If some of the population would look outside the Nigerian shores for employment, the pressure to provide mass employment by the government would reduce. After all, all the neighbouring countries are doing the same, by learning to speak the English language, in order to seek opportunities in Nigeria.

Furthermore, trade relations between Nigeria and its francophone neighbours is lucrative. Many Nigerians live in the Benin Republic, Cameroon, Niger and Chad for the purpose of trade. Many cross the border daily to trade with citizens of these countries. The French language would be an invaluable resource to such persons (ClubduSahel, 2001, Salaam, 2006).

### **French Language as a Tool for Security**

One of the salient points of the Change Agenda is that of security. The battle against the insurgents ‘Boko Haram’ has been ongoing without much progress, until the alliance of Nigeria with the neighbouring francophone nations. On March 26th, 2016, an emergency meeting for the establishment of a joint border patrol involving Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger, Chad and Benin Republic was held in Abuja, Nigeria (Juliet Alohan, 2016). Such a deal amongst the nations, would involve security agents and armed forces of the nations working hand in hand to secure the perimeters and the borders of the nations against terrorist attacks, as they are wont to do.

Proficiency in the French language would greatly increase smooth communication and interactions between Nigerian security operatives and armed personnel and those of the francophone neighbouring countries. Ademola (2013) speaking on this proficiency needs, opines that:

To have a proper control of security situations of our various borders, French language will play a great role. It will help our security agents in their inter-border monitoring. Similarly, it will enable them relate very well with their francophone counterparts, thereby boosting their collaborative efforts in combating crimes.

### **Possible Challenges of the French Language in the Change Agenda**

Some of the problems bedeviling the development of the French language from the inception of its learning in Nigeria include; government’s attitude to the implementation of its policies on the language in the National Policy on Education. Although the French language is made compulsory at primary and junior secondary schools levels (NPE, 2004), yet this is scarcely implemented in Nigerian public and private schools.

Other challenges include ignorance of the populace on the benefits of the language, lack of monitoring of policies on the language, attitude of Nigerians to its learning, lack of qualified teachers, lack of knowledge on proper approach and teaching methodology, lack of incentives and motivation for teachers and learners

alike and lack of awareness creation by the government on the importance of learning the language. Researches have shown that the learning of the French language in public schools in Nigeria is far from adequate. Many Nigerian secondary schools that are to consolidate the knowledge of the language acquired in the primary schools, do not even have a single French teacher, neither do they have materials that facilitate language learning, such as language laboratory, audio-visual materials, texts and other instructional aids. Other than the unavailability of teaching materials, availability of qualified French language teachers is also one of the problems bedeviling the learning of the language (Yekini, 2011, Research and Publication Committee, 2010, Ademola, 2014).

The National Policy on Education (2004) states that it is desirable for Nigerians to speak the French language, in order to foster smooth interaction with our francophone neighbours. It went on to declare for this purpose that French shall be the second official language in Nigeria. Yet, sometimes, Nigeria as a nation does not see eye to eye with its neighbours. On August 13, 2015, President Muhammadu Buhari sends Atiku Bagudu, the governor of Kebbi State to Benin Republic to settle a border dispute (Premium Times, 2015). This would not be the first time such border disputes occur, there have been others also in time past.

Border disputes between Nigeria and its francophone neighbours could suspend relations, thereby crippling not only economic activities, but also educational ones too. Educational activities such as Language Immersion Programme (L.I.P) and excursions are compulsory requirements for the graduation of language students (Nigeria Certificate in Education Minimum Standards for Languages, 2012). Border disputes affect these activities and jeopardize students' graduation.

Other times, terrorist activities such as those in Gamboru Ngala in Borno State, could cripple language immersion programmes (L.I.P.) and commercial activities. Terrorist actions have often caused Nigerian expatriates working in the border towns between Cameroon and Nigeria, students, tourists and other settlers to be constantly displaced. Such activities as these are some of the problems facing the development of the French language in the Change Agenda (Ludovica, 2015).

### **Recommendations**

What could government do differently to progress communicative ability of its citizens in the French language, since the paper has earlier stated this as one of the principal objective of the language learning in Nigeria? What contributions to the language's development can the government make?

As part of the solutions to the problem Philip (2016) recommends mass recruitment of teachers, training and remunerations also. Yekini (2010) also suggests incessant nationwide awareness creation on the benefits of the language, government dedication to implementing and monitoring of policies surrounding the language, sponsorship of research on the language, funding and provision of language teaching materials for

schools. Moreover, a cordial relationship between the nation and its neighbours would be of great advantage to the advancement of the teaching and learning of the language.

## Conclusion

From the submissions of this paper, we can deduce that French language is an invaluable asset to Nigeria as a nation and its citizens. In the current ongoing in the nations and in the direction of the government, application of the language in the lucrativeness described in this paper would ensure greater inter-relations and intercommunication between Nigeria and its francophone neighbours. Nigerians desiring to travel to these countries for education, work, trade or leisure, would be able to learn, labour, negotiate and relate effectively without any language barrier.

Indeed, the Change Agenda would be more workable linguistically and communicably, when the nation is more integrated into the global village via French language acquisition.

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