

FRENCH AS A TOOL FOR STRENGTHENING RELATIONS BETWEEN NIGERIA AND ITS NEIGHBOURS

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Abstract

In an increasingly interconnected West African sub-region, a common language plays a prominent role. Language facilitates diplomacy, trade, and socio-cultural cooperation among neighbouring states. Nigeria is officially anglophone; it is geographically surrounded by predominantly Francophone countries, making French an indispensable medium for regional interaction. However, the place of language in fostering cooperation and unity between Nigeria and the neighbouring countries has not been properly acknowledged in our policy formulation and implementation. This paper examines the strategic place of the French language in strengthening Nigeria's political, economic and cultural relations with its neighbouring states. It argues that proficiency in French enhances cross-border communication, promote mutual understanding, and reduce barriers that often hinder regional collaboration. Through French, Nigeria is better positioned to participate effectively in multilateral platforms such as Economic Community of West African States, where policy discussions, negotiations, and cooperative initiatives frequently involve Francophone members. The paper highlights how French language education contributes to diplomacy, international trade security cooperation, and people-to-people exchanges. It further explores the role of French in fostering regional integration, facilitating mobility and supporting Nigeria's leadership ambitions within West Africa. Despite its importance, challenges such as inadequate language instruction, lack of commitment from the government, limited teacher supply, low learner motivation etc continue to restrict effective utilization of French in national development and foreign relations. The paper therefore concludes that strengthening French language

teaching and promoting bilingual competence are essential steps toward deeper regional cooperation and sustainable development. It recommends policy reform, increased investment in language education, and institutional support to maximize the benefits of French as a tool for diplomacy and integration.

Keywords: *French language, regional integration, cross-border integration, Nigeria, and ECOWAS*

Resume

Dans une sous-région ouest-africaine de plus en plus interconnectée, la langue joue un rôle central dans la diplomatie, le commerce, la sécurité et la coopération socioculturelle. Le Nigéria est officiellement anglophone, mais il est géographiquement entouré de pays majoritairement francophones, ce qui fait du français un moyen essentiel et indispensable de communication et d'intégration régionale. Cependant, la place de la langue dans la promotion de la coopération et de l'unité entre le Nigéria et les pays voisins n'a pas été suffisamment reconnue et mis en œuvre.

Cet article examine l'importance stratégique de la langue française dans le renforcement des relations politiques, économiques et culturelles entre le Nigeria et ses pays voisins. Il soutient que la maîtrise du français améliore la communication transfrontalière, favorise la compréhension mutuelle et réduit les obstacles à l'intégration régionale. En outre, le français facilite la participation effective du Nigeria aux organisations multilatérales telles que la CEDEAO.

L'étude adopte une approche qualitative et analytique, fondée sur l'examen de la littérature existante et des cadres de politique linguistique. Elle met en évidence le rôle du français dans la diplomatie, le commerce, le maintien de la paix, la science et la technologie, ainsi que le tourisme. Elle identifie également des défis

majeurs tels que le manque d'enseignants qualifiés, la faible mise en œuvre des politiques linguistiques et le faible niveau de motivation des apprenants.

L'étude conclut que le renforcement de l'enseignement du français et la promotion du bilinguisme sont essentiels pour améliorer la coopération régionale et favoriser le développement durable. Elle recommande des réformes politiques, un investissement accru dans l'éducation linguistique et un soutien institutionnel plus fort.

1.0 Introduction

Nigeria occupies a strategic position in West Africa, sharing borders with several predominantly Francophone countries, including the Republics of Chad and Niger to the north, the Republic of Cameroon to the east, and the Republic of Benin to the west. The country is also bordered to the south by the Atlantic Ocean. Nigeria is vast in size, with a highly diverse population and a wide range of cultures and traditions. More than four hundred language groups can be found within its territory.

Although Nigeria operates officially in English, its geographical and political environment makes interaction with French-speaking neighboring countries inevitable in matters of trade, security, cooperation, migration, and diplomatic relations. In such a multilingual context, language serves not merely as a communicative tool but also as a practical instrument for building mutual understanding and strengthening ties among neighbouring states. Consequently, the growing relevance of French reflects Nigeria's need to engage more effectively within its immediate regional environment.

Beyond basic communication, the French language has become increasingly significant in Nigeria's foreign policy and regional participation. Active involvement in organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) requires

bilingual competence for effective dialogue, negotiation, and collaboration. As a result, French has emerged as an important tool for facilitating cross-border communication and regional engagement. It also reinforces the idea that a shared or common language is one of the most powerful instruments for strengthening relations between different groups of people.

In light of these realities, this paper explores how the strategic use of French can enhance Nigeria's relationships with its neighbours. It also identifies the educational and institutional measures necessary to maximize its benefits. Furthermore, in order to deepen this discussion, the next section transitions into the theoretical framework, which provides the conceptual foundation for understanding language as a tool of society, diplomacy, and regional integration.

2.0 THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Language and Society

Language is a core institution of human society. It is a fundamental institution of human society that distinguishes humans from other living organisms and enables complex social organization, communication, and cultural transmission. It is through language that human beings are able to express thoughts, share ideas, negotiate meaning, and build social relationships.

Afolayan (1979, as cited in Ajidahun, 2024)) emphasizes that without language, human beings cannot function effectively as social, cooperative, and creative beings. Language therefore elevates humans above the level of other animals by making them educable, governable, and capable of organizing civilized societies.

Similarly, Hall (1968, as cited in Njemanze et al., 2019) defines language as a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication and interaction. This definition highlights the

conventional and symbolic nature of language, which allows meaning to be shared within and across communities.

In contemporary linguistic scholarship, language is further described as a dynamic and rule-governed system that enables social interaction and identity construction in multilingual settings (Crystal, 2010; Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2021). This modern view emphasizes that language is not only a structural system but also a social practice shaped by context, power, and culture.

Language is a universal phenomenon, as every human society possesses a form of communication system. It is primarily used for communication within diverse ethnic groups, thereby promoting unity and social cohesion at the national level. In addition, language also facilitates cross-border interaction, international diplomacy, trade, and political cooperation among states.

To further clarify this sociolinguistic importance, it is necessary to examine how language functions within multilingual societies such as Nigeria, where it serves both local integration and international engagement purposes.

2.2 Sociolinguistic Perspective

Sociolinguistics is the branch of linguistics that studies the relationship between language and society, focusing on how language functions within different social contexts. It examines how factors such as culture, identity, politics, ethnicity, and power influence language use and distribution in society.

Wardhaugh and Fuller (2021) explain that sociolinguistics is concerned with how language operates in social life and how social structures influence linguistic behaviour. Similarly, Baker (2018) explains that language use is strongly shaped by social domains such as education, family, governance, and international communication. In multilingual societies like Nigeria, sociolinguistics is particularly relevant due to the coexistence of over 400 indigenous languages

alongside English and French. This linguistic diversity creates complex communication patterns such as code-switching, code-mixing, and language borrowing, which reflect the adaptive nature of language use in everyday interaction.

Furthermore, Spolsky (2004) identifies language policy as consisting of three interrelated components: language practices, language ideology, and language management. In Nigeria, although language policies exist, their implementation is often inconsistent, especially regarding the promotion of French as a second official language. This gap between policy and practice significantly affects language development outcomes.

From a sociopolitical perspective, language is also a tool of power, identity, and access to opportunities. English dominates official communication in Nigeria, while French holds strategic importance for regional diplomacy, particularly within ECOWAS and other West African frameworks. As a result, language choice often reflects political and economic priorities.

Therefore, sociolinguistics provides a useful framework for understanding the role of French in Nigeria's multilingual environment. It explains how language functions not only as a means of communication but also as a tool for diplomacy, integration, and national development.

This theoretical foundation provides a bridge to the broader review of existing literature on French language and regional integration. It therefore sets the stage for a more detailed examination of how scholars have conceptualized and evaluated the role of French in multilingual and diplomatic contexts. Consequently, the next section builds on this theoretical grounding by engaging with relevant empirical and theoretical studies on language policy, regional integration, and the strategic importance of French in West Africa.

3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The role of French as a strategic language in Nigeria and West Africa has attracted considerable scholarly attention. This section synthesizes existing literature on French language, multilingualism, language policy, sociolinguistics, language acquisition, and regional integration, with particular emphasis on how these studies inform Nigeria's linguistic and diplomatic realities.

3.1. French Language

French is widely recognized as one of the major international languages of communication, diplomacy, education, and culture. According to the Organization Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF, 2022–2023 report), French is spoken by over 320 million people globally, functioning both as a first language and as a second or foreign language across multiple continents. This wide distribution reflects its continued global expansion, particularly in Africa, where demographic growth is significantly increasing the number of French speakers.

Historically, French developed from Vulgar Latin and gradually evolved into one of the major Romance languages with distinct grammatical, phonological, and lexical systems. As explained by Hornsby (2019) in contemporary sociolinguistic studies of French, the language continues to evolve dynamically, especially in multilingual African and European contexts where it interacts with indigenous and global languages. Through historical processes such as migration, trade, and colonisation, French spread beyond Europe and became deeply rooted in Africa, the Caribbean, and parts of Asia, where it now functions as both an official and administrative language.

In contemporary global affairs, French occupies a strategic position in international governance and cooperation. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

(UNESCO, 2021) recognises French as one of the dominant languages of international diplomacy, used extensively in global education and cultural exchange. Similarly, the African Union (AU, 2020 Language Policy Framework) maintains French as one of its official working languages to enhance continental unity and administrative coordination. Within West Africa, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS, 2021 policy updates) continues to use French alongside English to facilitate communication among its member states, most of which are Francophone countries.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, Blanchet and Hoyer (2019) argue that global languages such as French derive their strength from institutional recognition, transnational mobility, and educational policy frameworks. In addition, Makoni and Severo (2020) emphasize that colonial languages in Africa, including French, have undergone processes of localisation and adaptation, making them essential tools in education, governance, and international relations. Thus, French functions not only as a heritage language but also as a global functional language used in diplomacy, science, trade, and education.

In the African context, French remains a dominant official language in several countries surrounding Nigeria, including Benin Republic, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. According to Bokamba (2020) and Anchimbe (2021), Francophone Africa represents one of the most significant regions for French language use today, particularly in governance and cross-border communication. This geographical reality makes French highly relevant for Nigeria's external relations, especially in areas such as trade, regional security cooperation, migration management, and diplomacy.

In Nigeria, French has been promoted as a strategically important language due to its geopolitical environment. Contemporary policy analysis by Igboanusi and Wolf (2020) shows that Nigeria's

multilingual language policy reflects both pragmatic necessity and regional integration goals. Although English remains the official language, French is increasingly recognized as a critical tool for strengthening Nigeria's relationship with its Francophone neighbours in West Africa.

Osisanwo (updated scholarly discussions referenced in later linguistic reviews) highlights the continued global importance of French, noting its wide geographical spread and international relevance. This aligns with recent data from the OIF (2023), which confirms that French is currently one of the fastest-growing languages in the world, particularly due to its rapid expansion in Sub-Saharan Africa.

French is not only a historical European language but also a dynamic global language of diplomacy, education, and international relations. For Nigeria, its importance is especially significant due to its strategic location within a Francophone-dominated region. Therefore, strengthening French language education remains essential for improving Nigeria's regional integration, diplomatic engagement, and socio-economic cooperation with its neighbours.

3.2. French Language and Regional Integration in West Africa

Scholars agree that French serves as a crucial lingua franca in West African regional relations, especially among Francophone states such as Benin Republic, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. In multilingual regional blocs, shared languages facilitate diplomacy, trade, and security cooperation. Wardhaugh and Fuller (2021) emphasize that language functions as a central tool for social and political interaction across linguistic boundaries, particularly in multilingual regions.

Beyond this, Djité (2008) argues that multilingualism in Africa should be viewed as a resource rather than a barrier, particularly in fostering regional development and cooperation. Similarly,

Blommaert (2010) highlights that globalization has intensified the importance of linguistic mobility, where languages such as French gain functional value in transnational communication.

Within ECOWAS, French operates as a bridge language between Anglophone and Francophone member states. Adegbija (2004) notes that shared linguistic systems significantly enhance diplomatic efficiency and regional integration in West Africa.

3.3. Language Policy and Implementation in Nigeria

Language policy in Nigeria reflects a complex multilingual reality. Although English remains the official language, French is recognized as a second official language, yet its implementation remains weak in practice. Bamgbose (2011) argues that Nigeria's language policy suffers from a persistent gap between formulation and implementation.

May (2014) further explains that language policy is deeply connected to power relations and national ideology, influencing which languages are promoted or marginalized. In Nigeria's case, English dominates governance and education, while French remains underutilized despite its strategic importance.

Spolsky (2004) provides a useful framework for understanding language policy through three components: language practices, language beliefs, and language management. In Nigeria, while policy documents exist, actual classroom and institutional practices often fail to reflect intended multilingual goals.

3.4. Teaching and Learning of French in Nigeria

The teaching of French in Nigeria faces significant pedagogical and structural challenges. Obanya (2002) and Bamgbose (2011) observe that inadequate instructional materials and insufficiently trained teachers limit effective French acquisition.

Baker (2018) emphasizes that successful language learning

depends on meaningful exposure and functional use within real-life contexts. However, in Nigeria, French is often taught as an abstract academic subject rather than a communicative skill.

Furthermore, second language acquisition theories provide additional insight. Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982) suggests that learners acquire language best when exposed to comprehensible input slightly above their current level ($i+1$). Similarly, Cummins (2000; 2017) highlights the importance of cognitive academic language proficiency, showing that learners need sustained exposure and academic support to achieve fluency.

Motivation also plays a critical role. Garrett (2010) explains that learners' attitudes toward a language significantly influence their willingness to acquire it. In Nigeria, French is often perceived as less immediately useful than English, reducing learner motivation and engagement.

3.5. Sociolinguistic Dynamics and Multilingual Reality

Nigeria's linguistic environment is highly diverse, with over 400 indigenous languages coexisting alongside English and French. Wardhaugh and Fuller (2021) explain that multilingual societies naturally give rise to phenomena such as code-switching, code-mixing, and diglossia.

Trudgill (2000) further notes that language variation is a normal feature of social life, shaped by identity, region, and social class. In Nigeria, English often functions as the language of prestige, while indigenous languages serve local communication needs, and French remains largely restricted to academic and diplomatic domains.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, language attitudes are central to language survival and expansion. Garrett (2010) argues that positive or negative perceptions of a language strongly influence its adoption and use in society. In Nigeria, the dominance of English and limited exposure to French have shaped relatively weak attitudes toward French usage outside formal settings.

3.5 Benefits of French language in Nigeria and West Africa

The French language plays a significant role in enhancing Nigeria's engagement within the West African sub-region. Its importance extends beyond communication to key areas as we discuss below.

3.5.1. Regional Integration and Bilateral Trade (ECOWAS)

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established on 28 May 1975 to promote economic integration among West African countries, including Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, Niger, and others. A significant number of these member states are Francophone countries, making French a dominant language of communication within the sub-region.

According to Oni (1980), ECOWAS was created to enhance economic stability by strengthening cooperation among member states. In a more recent analysis, Adebajo (2018) explains that ECOWAS integration efforts are heavily influenced by linguistic diversity, which often creates communication barriers between Anglophone and Francophone states. Similarly, the ECOWAS Commission (2021) highlights that language remains a key factor in achieving effective trade negotiations, policy harmonisation, and regional mobility.

As Osisanwo (2003) argues, Nigeria cannot rely solely on English in regional engagement “if Nigeria is to achieve genuine global interaction with as many of these nations as possible, restricting herself to English alone cannot yield the desired results”. Osisanwo (2003:17) opines.

*If Nigeria is to achieve genuine global interaction with as many of these nations as possible, restricting herself to the acquisition and use of English language alone can never yield the desired results... in these days of global economic advancement, Nigeria must interact whether she likes it or not, with all her neighbours in the area of **Bilateral Trade**.*

In the same direction, Igboanusi and Wolf (2020) emphasize that multilingual competence is essential for Nigeria's economic diplomacy in West Africa.

Therefore, French functions as a bridge language for trade, diplomacy, and regional cooperation, strengthening relations between Nigeria and its Francophone neighbours.

3.5.2. Peacekeeping and Regional Security

Peacekeeping involves coordinated military, political, and humanitarian efforts aimed at preventing conflict and restoring stability in crisis-prone regions. In West Africa, ECOWAS has become a major actor in peacekeeping operations through interventions in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Mali, and Guinea-Bissau. According to the United Nations Peacekeeping Report (2022), successful peacekeeping depends heavily on communication, coordination, and shared operational language among participating forces.

In the West African context, Aning (2019) observes that linguistic differences between Anglophone and Francophone troops often create operational challenges during joint missions. Similarly, Bah (2021) notes that ECOWAS peacekeeping effectiveness improves significantly when bilingual communication (English and French) is used for coordination and intelligence sharing.

This is particularly relevant for Nigeria, which plays a leading role in ECOWAS security operations. As Omede (2020) argues, Nigeria's regional security leadership requires linguistic adaptability to effectively engage Francophone partners.

Therefore, French strengthens regional peacekeeping by improving:

- military coordination
- intelligence sharing
- diplomatic mediation
- cross-border security collaboration

This demonstrates that French is not only a communication tool but also a security integration instrument in West Africa.

3.5.3 Science and Technology Cooperation

French also plays a significant role in scientific research, technological development, and academic collaboration. According to the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF, 2023), French is widely used in higher education, research publications, and innovation networks across Francophone countries. In contemporary scholarship, Djité (2020) explains that African scientific development is strongly influenced by multilingual knowledge systems, particularly English and French.

Similarly, Makoni and Severo (2020) argue that African researchers benefit significantly from engaging with both Francophone and Anglophone academic resources.

French facilitates access to:

- scientific journals
- engineering research
- medical publications
- environmental studies
- international conferences

According to UNESCO (2022), multilingual scientific communication improves global research collaboration and innovation exchange.

For Nigeria, this means that French enables participation in:

- joint research with France and Canada
- Francophone African scientific networks
- international scholarships and academic mobility

Osisanwo (2003) on the area of technology adds:

The whole world is in the age of computer technology which has turned the world to a global village. If Nigeria wants to derived maximum benefits from this technological advancement, reliance on English language alone may not hasten the attainment of the desired goal. The French nations are not lagging behind in the on going technological breakthrough.

Thus, French strengthens Nigeria's scientific and technological relations with Francophone countries, enhancing innovation and development.

3.5.4 Tourism and Cultural Exchange

French is a powerful tool for tourism development and cultural diplomacy. It enables communication between Nigeria and millions of tourists from Francophone countries in Africa, Europe, and North America. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2022), language accessibility is one of the major factors influencing tourist satisfaction and destination choice.

In West Africa, Adejunmobi (2021) notes that multilingual competence significantly improves tourism services and cross-border cultural exchange. French facilitates communication between tourists and service providers, improved hospitality services, cultural understanding and exchange, and increased tourism revenue

As Tuedor (2003) emphasizes, French is a vital factor in West African travel and tourism industries. Furthermore, OIF (2022) reports that Francophone tourism continues to expand globally, especially from France, Belgium, and Canada, making French an economic asset for tourism development.

Therefore, French strengthens Nigeria's relations with Francophone countries by promoting:

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cultural diplomacy

- tourism cooperation
- economic exchange
- people-to-people interaction

Despite these numerous benefits, the effective utilization of French in Nigeria and West Africa is not without challenges. In practice, several structural, institutional, and educational constraints limit the full realization of its potential as a tool for regional integration. These difficulties weaken the impact of French in achieving its intended role in diplomacy, trade, and cooperation. Therefore, it is important to examine the key challenges facing the adoption and development of French language in Nigeria.

4.0 Some of The Challenges Facing French Language Teaching and Learning in Nigeria

French language development in Nigeria faces several interrelated challenges that hinder its effective implementation and use.

First, there is a shortage of qualified French language teachers in many schools and institutions, which affects the quality of instruction and learner proficiency.

Second, weak implementation of language policies reduces the effectiveness of French language promotion at both primary, secondary, and tertiary levels.

Third, low learner motivation continues to be a major obstacle, as many students perceive French as difficult or less relevant compared to English.

Fourth, there is insufficient availability of instructional materials such as textbooks, audio-visual aids, and modern language laboratories.

Finally, limited institutional and governmental support further restricts the development of French language education and its integration into national development plans.

These challenges collectively hinder Nigeria's ability to fully benefit from French as a strategic tool for diplomacy, regional integration, and socio-economic development in West Africa.

5.0. Conclusion

In conclusion, the French language plays an important role in strengthening Nigeria's relationship with its neighbouring countries, many of which are French-speaking. As Nigeria shares borders with countries such as Benin, Niger, and Cameroon, the ability to communicate in French helps to facilitate mutual understanding in diplomacy, science and technology, peace keeping and cultural exchange. When Nigerians are able to use French effectively, it reduces communication barriers and promotes smoother interactions in regional affairs.

Furthermore, the promotion of French in Nigeria can enhance collaboration within regional organizations like Economic Community of West African States, where French is widely used as a working language. Through education, government policies, and cross-border initiatives, French can serve as a bridge that connects Nigeria with its francophone neighbours and encourages peaceful coexistence and economic partnership.

Ultimately, strengthening the teaching and practical use of French in Nigeria will not only improve diplomatic and socio-economic relations but will also help Nigeria play a more active and influential role in West Africa. By embracing French as a tool of communication and cooperation, Nigeria can deepen regional integration and foster stronger ties with the countries that surround it.

Finally, it is obvious from the submission of this paper that Nigeria cannot do without relating with other countries in the world especially her French neighbours. Moreso, there are blessings attached to this relationship. Hence, government should create a conducive atmosphere where the learning of French would be facilitated.

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