Le Rôle du Français dans la Diplomatie et le Développement Durable du Nigeria : Stratégies de Communication pour un Impact Régional et Mondial
The Role of French in Nigeria's Diplomacy and Sustainable Development: Communication Strategies for Regional and Global Impact

Ishibie, Charity Isaac
Department of French,
School of Secondary Education (Languages),
Federal College of Education (Technical),
Omoku. Rivers State.
Email: okpagic@gmail.com

&
Edebiri, Peculiar Imadeyo
Department of Microbiology,
Rivers State University,
Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt. Rivers State.
Email: peczela@gmail.com

Abstract

This study explores the significance of the French language in Nigeria's diplomacy and sustainable development efforts, emphasizing its role in fostering regional and global engagement. As Nigeria interacts with Francophone nations within Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the African Union (AU), and other international organizations, French serves as a critical tool for diplomacy, trade, and cross-border cooperation. This research adopts a secondary data approach, utilizing government reports, policy documents, news articles, and academic literature to analyze the impact of French on Nigeria's diplomatic strategies. The study highlights key areas where French facilitates diplomatic negotiations, economic partnerships, and peacekeeping initiatives. Additionally, it examines communication strategies that enhance Nigeria's global presence, including bilingual education policies, diplomatic language training, and media engagement. Findings suggest that strengthening French proficiency among Nigerian diplomats and business leaders can significantly improve regional

integration and international influence. The research underscores the necessity of French language as a strategic asset in global affairs, recommending policy measures to enhance French language acquisition in diplomatic and economic sectors. By leveraging linguistic competence, Nigeria can position itself as a more effective player in regional governance, economic cooperation, and international development partnerships.

Keywords: Nigeria's diplomacy, Sustainable Development, Regional integration, Economic cooperation, Communication strategies

Résumé

Cette étude explore l'importance de la langue française dans les efforts de diplomatie et de développement durable du Nigeria, en soulignant son rôle dans la promotion de l'engagement régional et mondial. Alors que le Nigeria interagit avec les nations francophones au sein de la Communauté économique des États de l'Afrique de l'Ouest (CEDEAO), de l'Union africaine

(UA) et d'autres organisations internationales, le français est un outil essentiel pour la diplomatie, le commerce et la coopération transfrontalière. Cette recherche adopte une approche de données secondaires, en utilisant des rapports gouvernementaux, des documents de politique, des articles de presse et de la littérature universitaire pour analyser l'impact du français sur les stratégies diplomatiques du Nigeria. L'étude met en évidence les principaux domaines dans lesquels la France facilite les négociations diplomatiques, les partenariats économiques et les initiatives de maintien de la paix. En outre, il examine les stratégies de communication qui renforcent la présence mondiale du Nigeria, y compris les politiques d'éducation bilingue, la formation linguistique diplomatique et l'engagement des médias. Les résultats suggèrent que le renforcement de la compétence française parmi les diplomates et les chefs d'entreprise nigérians peut améliorer considérablement l'intégration régionale et l'influence internationale. La recherche souligne la nécessité de la langue française comme atout stratégique dans les affaires mondiales, recommandant des mesures politiques pour améliorer l'acquisition de la langue française dans les secteurs diplomatique et économique. En tirant parti des compétences linguistiques, le Nigeria peut se positionner comme un acteur plus efficace dans la gouvernance

régionale, la coopération économique et les partenariats internationaux de développement.

Mots clés : Diplomatie du Nigeria, Développement durable, Intégration régionale, Coopération économique, Stratégies de communication

Introduction

Language is a powerful instrument in international relations, serving as a medium for diplomacy, economic cooperation, and sustainable development. Effective communication is essential for fostering mutual understanding among nations, facilitating negotiations, and strengthening bilateral and multilateral relations. In an increasingly globalized world, multilingual competence plays a significant role in international diplomacy, trade, and development initiatives. Among the world's most influential languages, French stands out due to its extensive use in diplomatic affairs, economic collaborations, and international organizations.

French is not only an official language of global institutions such as the United Nations (UN), the African Union (AU), and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), but it also serves as a key working language in numerous diplomatic and economic engagements. This makes it an indispensable tool for international relations, particularly in Africa, where over 20 countries use French as their official or primary administrative language.

The ability to communicate effectively in French is thus crucial for nations that seek to establish strong diplomatic ties, participate in regional economic initiatives, and contribute to sustainable development efforts.

Nigeria, Africa's most populous country and largest economy, is predominantly an English-speaking nation but is geographically positioned among Francophone countries, including Benin, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. These countries, along with other ECOWAS member states, rely heavily on French for governance, economic transactions, and diplomatic discussions. Despite Nigeria's strategic location and its leadership role in West Africa, a significant linguistic barrier exists between Nigeria and its Francophone neighbors. While French was officially designated as Nigeria's second language in 1996, its implementation in diplomatic

and governmental affairs has remained limited. This situation presents challenges in regional cooperation, economic negotiations, and security coordination.

In the context of sustainable development, language proficiency plays a crucial role in ensuring the effective implementation of cross-border initiatives, policy harmonization, and multinational collaborations. Sustainable development, as outlined in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), requires seamless communication among nations to address global challenges such as climate change, economic disparity, and regional security threats. The inability to communicate fluently in a shared language can create barriers to effective policy execution and regional cooperation, thereby hindering sustainable growth. As Nigeria continues to engage in international and regional dialogues, proficiency in French can significantly enhance its ability to participate in sustainable development efforts and strengthen its diplomatic standing.

Problem Statement

A key challenge in Nigeria's diplomacy is the language barrier with Francophone nations. Limited French proficiency among policymakers, diplomats, and business leaders hampers high-level negotiations and economic agreements. While ECOWAS operates bilingually, Nigeria's English dominance puts it at a disadvantage. In trade, language limitations complicate contracts and negotiations, necessitating interpreters and causing delays. Moreover, Nigeria's security operations, particularly in peacekeeping, require better French fluency for effective coordination.

Objectives of the Study

This research aims to:

1. Examine the impact of French proficiency on Nigeria's diplomacy with Francophone countries and international organizations, particularly in ECOWAS and AU engagements.
2. Assess the role of French in economic cooperation, particularly trade and investment.
3. Identify challenges limiting the effective use of French in Nigeria's diplomatic and development efforts.

4. Propose communication strategies to enhance Nigeria's regional and global engagement through improved French competence.

Literature Review

Linguistic Relativity and Diplomacy

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis suggests that language shapes thought and influences diplomacy (Whorf, 1956). Linguistic competence enhances diplomatic effectiveness by reducing misinterpretations and fostering trust (Crystal, 1997). In West Africa, where French dominates international relations, language choice affects power dynamics, alliances, and credibility (Duranti, 1997).

Sustainable Development and Communication

Language plays a vital role in achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by facilitating policy implementation and cooperation (UNESCO, 2010). Linguistic barriers impede development efforts, particularly in multilingual regions (UN, 2015). Nigeria's limited French proficiency restricts access to Francophone research, funding, and collaborations (Akinrinlola, 2019).

French as a Diplomatic Tool

French is key in African diplomacy, especially in ECOWAS and the AU (Adegbite, 2017). Bilingual diplomats wield greater influence in negotiations (Crystal, 2003). Most ECOWAS agreements are in French, making linguistic proficiency essential (Ojo, 2016). Language barriers hinder smooth negotiations and regional cooperation (Kamto, 2005).

Economic and Political Benefits of Multilingualism

Multilingualism strengthens trade, investment, and diplomatic ties (Grin, 2002; Ginsburgh & Weber, 2011). Nigeria's language barriers limit trade with Francophone countries (Nwoke, 2018), while nations prioritizing foreign languages experience stronger economic and political growth (Bamgbose, 2000; Batibo, 2005).

French in ECOWAS, AU, and Trade

French-speaking ECOWAS states hold leadership advantages (Babatunde, 2014; Makoni & Pennycook, 2007). Language barriers obstruct economic integration

(Owolabi & Nnaji, 2015). Nigeria's limited French proficiency weakens its influence in regional policies and AU negotiations (Adegbite, 2017; Kamto, 2005).

Research Gap

Few studies examine the intersection of language, diplomacy, and sustainable development in Nigeria. Most research focuses on Francophone nations, overlooking English-dominant countries (Akinrinlola, 2019). This study bridges the gap by analyzing French proficiency's role in Nigeria's diplomacy and sustainable development efforts.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-method approach, integrating qualitative (discourse and policy analysis) and quantitative (statistical evaluation of trade and education exchanges) methods. This ensures a comprehensive understanding of how French proficiency impacts Nigeria's diplomacy and economic engagements.

Data Collection Methods

1. **Policy & Government Reports**: Analyzing official documents from Nigeria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, AU, and UN on multilingualism and diplomatic strategies.
2. **Media & Interviews**: Insights from BBC Africa, The Guardian Nigeria, and Premium Times on trade negotiations, diplomatic relations, and peacekeeping efforts.
3. **Academic Literature**: Peer-reviewed articles from Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ResearchGate on language policy and economic diplomacy.
4. **Case Studies**: Examining Nigeria's relations with Francophone West Africa, ECOWAS peacekeeping, and French-language business expansions in key industries.

Analytical Framework

- **Discourse Analysis**: Reviewing diplomatic speeches, treaties, and policy documents to assess language use in negotiations and regional cooperation.

- **Statistical Evaluation**: Analyzing trade volumes, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) trends, and educational data on French language training programs to measure economic and diplomatic impact.

Results

1. French Proficiency and Nigeria's Diplomatic Relations

Nigeria's limited French proficiency weakens its diplomatic effectiveness, causing delays in ECOWAS negotiations due to reliance on interpreters. Analysis of ministerial transcripts (ECOWAS, 2023) highlights translation discrepancies that impact policy agreements. Efforts like the 2021 Language Training Initiative exist but suffer from inconsistent implementation and insufficient funding (The Guardian Nigeria, 2022).

2. Economic and Trade Implications

Linguistic barriers hinder Nigeria's trade with Francophone nations, limiting market expansion and increasing negotiation complexities (ECOWAS Trade Reports, 2021, 2023). Case studies of Dangote Group's expansion reveal that businesses with French-speaking staff perform better (BusinessDay Nigeria, 2023). Compared to Ghana, Nigeria's exports to Francophone West Africa remain at only 20% due to its weaker bilingual policies (Premium Times, 2023).

3. French in Regional Organizations (ECOWAS, AU, etc.)

French dominates ECOWAS and AU operations, reducing Nigeria's leadership role in regional policy-making and peacekeeping missions (ECOWAS, 2019; AU, 2021). Case studies from Mali and Chad (2020–2023) show that Francophone nations lead security efforts while Nigeria's forces struggle with communication (Ministry of Defense, 2022).

4. Government and Institutional Efforts to Promote French

Government initiatives such as the 2021 Language Training Initiative for Diplomats and bilingual education policies (Ministry of Education, 2022) exist, but funding shortages and lack of continuity hinder their impact. While French course enrollments have increased, advanced professional training remains limited (Daily Trust, 2023).

5. Challenges and Gaps in Implementation

Key barriers to French adoption in Nigeria's diplomacy and economy include:

- **Insufficient Institutional Support**: Government language policies lack sustained commitment (Vanguard Nigeria, 2023).
- **Limited Diplomatic Proficiency**: No mandatory French training for Nigerian diplomats (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021).
- **Private Sector Hesitation**: Only 30% of Nigerian multinational companies invest in French training (Nigerian-French Chamber of Commerce, 2023).

This study highlights the urgent need for a proactive language policy to enhance Nigeria's diplomatic influence, trade competitiveness, and regional leadership in West Africa.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the critical role of the French language in Nigeria's diplomatic, economic, and regional engagements. Despite Nigeria's leadership in West Africa, its limited French proficiency remains a significant obstacle, affecting international negotiations, trade expansion, and security collaborations. This discussion situates these findings within existing research and policy frameworks, outlining both progress made and persistent challenges.

1. Impact of French Proficiency on Diplomatic Relations

Nigeria's reliance on interpreters and translation services in ECOWAS and AU negotiations limits its diplomatic efficiency. ECOWAS ministerial transcripts (2023) reveal translation inconsistencies, impacting policy coherence and decision-making. Studies by Adegbite (2020) and Okonkwo (2019) confirm that linguistic barriers hinder effective diplomacy and create misinterpretations in bilateral agreements.

The 2021 Language Training Policy aimed to address this issue, but reports from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2024) indicate inconsistent implementation and insufficient funding. This aligns with Ojo and Balogun (2021), who argue that linguistic capacity-building is often deprioritized due to competing political and economic priorities.

2. Economic Cooperation and Trade Barriers

Nigeria's economic relations with Francophone nations are significantly hindered by language barriers (ECOWAS Trade Reports, 2021, 2023). Businesses without French-speaking staff struggle with contract negotiations, regulatory compliance, and investment agreements.

A case study on Dangote Group's expansion into Benin and Côte d'Ivoire (Business Day Nigeria, 2023) confirms that bilingual companies perform better in Francophone markets. Kouadio (2020) emphasizes that bilingualism enhances trade efficiency within ECOWAS, reinforcing the need for French-language training in Nigerian businesses.

Additionally, ECOWAS trade data (2020–2024) reveals that Nigeria's exports to Francophone West Africa account for only 20% of its total regional trade, while Ghana, with stronger French language policies, has a higher trade penetration (Mensah, 2022).

3. Role of French in Regional Security and Peacekeeping

Nigeria plays a pivotal role in ECOWAS and AU peacekeeping operations, yet its limited French proficiency weakens coordination with Francophone military forces. Reports from ECOWAS (2022) and the Nigerian Ministry of Defence (2022) indicate that Nigerian troops require interpreters during joint security operations, slowing response times and compromising operational efficiency.

Case studies of ECOWAS peacekeeping missions in Mali and Chad (2019–2023) reveal that Francophone nations often lead regional security efforts, while Nigeria's influence remains limited due to linguistic constraints. Abubakar (2021) supports this claim, arguing that language barriers in African peacekeeping efforts reduce multinational trust and effectiveness.

4. Linguistic Preparedness in Nigeria's Business Expansion into Francophone Markets

Efforts to improve French proficiency in Nigeria's professional and business sectors have been largely inconsistent. The Ministry of Education and Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2020–2024) introduced initiatives such as the 2021 Language

Training Initiative for Diplomats and bilingual education programs (2022), yet their impact remains limited.

Nwosu (2022) highlights that Nigeria's bilingual education policies lack government commitment, leading to limited participation by businesses and institutions. A survey by the Nigerian-French Chamber of Commerce (2023) found that only 30% of Nigerian multinational companies offer French-language training for employees. This aligns with Oladipo and Etim (2021), who note that Nigerian businesses hesitate to invest in linguistic development, despite its economic benefits.

5. Persistent Challenges and Policy Gaps

Although Nigeria recognized French as a second language in 1996, policy implementation remains weak. The National French Language Policy was discontinued in 2022 (Ministry of Education, 2023), reflecting a lack of long-term political commitment.

Studies by Ogundele (2021) and Eze (2023) highlight that Nigeria's foreign policy does not sufficiently integrate language acquisition as a strategic diplomatic and economic tool. Reports from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2021) confirm that less than 10% of Nigerian diplomats receive advanced French training before deployment, limiting Nigeria's engagement in Francophone diplomatic affairs.

6. Comparative Analysis with Other ECOWAS Member States

A comparative review of Ghana's bilingual policies (ECOWAS, 2023) shows that Ghana's proactive approach to French education has led to stronger diplomatic and trade relations with Francophone nations.

Ghana enforces compulsory French education in schools, businesses, and government institutions, ensuring that its workforce is better equipped for regional trade and diplomatic engagement (Mensah, 2022). In contrast, Nigeria's lack of a structured bilingual policy places it at a disadvantage, further emphasizing the need for policy reform.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen French training for diplomats and officials through partnerships with Alliance Française and Foreign Service language programs.
2. Improve French education in primary and secondary schools and universities by reinstating and enforcing the National French Language Policy.
3. Encourage businesses to invest in corporate French training and establish bilingual trade support centers.
4. Enhance military and security training in French to strengthen peacekeeping operations.
5. Ensure policy commitment and sustainable implementation through a National Council on Bilingualism.
6. The Ministry of Tourism should collaborate with Francophone countries on bilingual tourism and cultural programs.
7. Ministry of Sports should incorporate French into sports diplomacy during regional events like (West African Football Union) WAFU and ECOWAS Games.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Nigeria's limited French proficiency significantly affects its diplomacy, trade, and regional security engagements. Despite Nigeria's dominant role in West Africa, its reliance on interpreters and inadequate linguistic preparedness weakens its influence in ECOWAS negotiations, trade agreements, and peacekeeping missions. Case studies on diplomatic relations, economic cooperation, security coordination, and business expansion reveal that linguistic barriers continue to hinder Nigeria's integration with Francophone nations.

While efforts such as the 2021 Language Training Initiative for Diplomats and bilingual education programs indicate some progress, gaps in implementation, policy discontinuity, and inadequate institutional support remain major challenges. The experiences of other ECOWAS nations, particularly Ghana, highlight the benefits of structured bilingual policies in enhancing regional integration.

To strengthen its position as a regional leader, Nigeria must prioritize French language training at both governmental and institutional levels. By implementing structured language policies, enhancing trade facilitation, and improving linguistic capabilities within its diplomatic and security sectors, Nigeria can maximize its influence and foster deeper cooperation with Francophone West Africa. A comprehensive and sustained commitment to French language education will not only enhance Nigeria's international relations but also contribute to its long-term economic and diplomatic objectives in the region.

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