

FRENCH LANGUAGE AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The place of foreign languages in the developmental trajectories of postcolonial states has become an increasingly urgent subject of scholarly inquiry, particularly for nations such as Nigeria that share extensive borders with Francophone neighbours. This paper examines the relationship between French language competence and national development in Nigeria, arguing that French functions not merely as an academic subject but as a strategic linguistic resource with direct implications for regional diplomacy, cross-border trade, security cooperation, and human capital formation. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of linguistic capital and human capital theory, the paper situates French within Nigeria's language-in-education policy history, tracing its designation as the country's second official language under the National Policy on Education. The paper then examines four principal dimensions through which French contributes to national development: economic integration within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), diplomatic and security cooperation with francophone neighbours, educational and human capital development, and socio-cultural exchange within the Francophonie. It further interrogates the structural, infrastructural, and pedagogical challenges that continue to limit the effective deployment of French as a developmental resource in Nigeria, with particular reference to under-resourced institutions in states such as Kogi. The paper concludes by proposing a policy and pedagogical agenda for repositioning French language education as a deliberate instrument of national development rather than a peripheral curricular requirement.

Keywords: French language, national development, language policy, Francophonie, linguistic capital, Nigeria

Introduction

Language occupies a strategic position in national development because it serves not only as a medium of communication but also as an instrument for education, economic interaction, diplomacy, regional integration, and international cooperation. In an increasingly interconnected world, proficiency in strategically important languages can enhance a country's human capital and

strengthen its capacity to participate effectively in regional and global affairs. For Nigeria, the importance of multilingual competence is particularly significant because of its geographical, economic, political, and security relationships with neighbouring countries. Nigeria shares borders with predominantly Francophone countries, namely Benin Republic, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, making French an important language for cross-border communication, diplomacy, trade, education, and regional cooperation. Consequently, competence in French can be regarded not merely as an educational attainment but as a potential instrument for advancing Nigeria's national and regional interests (Odudigbo & Musa, 2024; Ojo Wende et al., 2023).

The strategic importance of French to Nigeria has been reflected in national educational policy. The National Policy on Education provided that, in the interest of facilitating interaction with Nigeria's Francophone neighbours, French should serve as the country's second official language and should be taught at the primary and junior secondary school levels (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004). However, this policy position should be understood primarily as a governmental and educational policy commitment rather than as a constitutional designation equivalent to the official status of English. The Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) continues to recognise French as part of the Junior Secondary School curriculum, demonstrating the continuing place of the language within Nigeria's formal education system (Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council [NERDC], n.d.). Recent studies, however, indicate that the implementation of French-language education has continued to face challenges relating to teaching quality, learning resources, teacher preparation, learner motivation, and the broader perception of French within the Nigerian educational environment (Babalola, 2024; Ojo Wende et al., 2023).

The relevance of French to national development extends beyond the classroom. Nigeria's position within West Africa requires sustained interaction with Francophone states in areas such as commerce, diplomacy, migration, security, education, and regional integration. Contemporary research on African economic integration indicates that stronger connectivity among African countries is associated with trade, human capital, institutional cooperation, and other factors that facilitate regional economic participation (Choramo et al., 2024). In this context, linguistic competence can reduce communication barriers and enhance the ability of Nigerian professionals, entrepreneurs, diplomats, teachers, security personnel, and other stakeholders to operate effectively across linguistic boundaries. Odudigbo and Musa (2024) similarly argue that strengthening French-language learning in Nigeria could contribute to the country's development by increasing the functional use of French alongside English.

The educational sector therefore represents a critical pathway through which the developmental value of French can be realised. The existence of French programmes in universities and Colleges of Education, including the Federal College of Education, Okene, provides an institutional

foundation for producing teachers and other professionals with French-language competence. Nevertheless, the continued existence of the subject in the curriculum does not automatically translate into functional proficiency among learners. Babalola (2024), in examining the teaching of French in Nigerian Colleges of Education, identifies challenges affecting learners, teachers, and the general teaching and learning process. Similarly, Ojo Wende et al. (2023) highlight persistent pedagogical and institutional issues surrounding French-language teaching in Nigeria. These concerns suggest that greater attention must be given not only to the inclusion of French in educational policy but also to the quality, resources, methods, and outcomes associated with its teaching and learning.

The contemporary Nigerian context further strengthens the need to reconsider the role of French as a developmental resource. Nigeria's linguistic environment is highly diverse, while its geographical position places it at the intersection of Anglophone and Francophone West Africa. At the same time, recent changes in national language-in-education policy demonstrate that language policy remains an evolving area of national debate. In 2025, the Federal Government reaffirmed English as the medium of instruction across Nigeria's education system while introducing an Inclusive Language Policy intended to address linguistic and educational concerns (Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation, 2025). This development reinforces the need for a balanced understanding of multilingualism in Nigeria, in which English continues to serve its dominant institutional functions while additional languages such as French can provide Nigerians with valuable regional and international competencies.

Against this background, French should be viewed as more than an academic subject. Its potential contribution to Nigeria's national development lies in its capacity to facilitate communication with neighbouring Francophone countries, strengthen diplomatic and economic relations, improve regional cooperation, expand employment and entrepreneurial opportunities, and support Nigeria's participation in African and international institutions. The central challenge, therefore, is to bridge the gap between the policy recognition of French and its functional acquisition by Nigerians. This requires sustained investment in teacher education, instructional materials, language laboratories, modern pedagogical approaches, digital learning resources, and opportunities for authentic communication in French. Consequently, a clearer understanding of the relationship between French-language proficiency and national development is necessary for informing educational policy and practice and for repositioning French as a functional resource for Nigeria's socio-economic, diplomatic, educational, and regional development.

Conceptual Clarifications

Language

Language is conventionally defined as a systematic and conventional means of human communication, but for the purposes of development studies it is more useful to treat language as a social institution that mediates access to resources, opportunities, and networks. A language is never merely a code for transmitting information; it is also a repository of cultural meaning and a gatekeeper that determines who can participate in particular economic, political, or diplomatic transactions. Applied linguists working within Nigeria's multilingual context, including Efurosibina Adegbiya, have long argued that language choices in postcolonial African states are inseparable from questions of power, access, and national cohesion. It is this gatekeeping function of language that makes French relevant to a discussion of national development, since competence in French determines the ease with which Nigerian citizens, institutions, and the state itself can transact with a francophone regional environment.

National Development

National development is understood here as the sustained process by which a country expands the capabilities of its citizens and institutions, encompassing economic growth, social welfare, security, and the strengthening of a nation's standing within regional and international systems. Recent Nigerian scholarship on language policy has emphasised that development in this sense is not reducible to economic indicators alone but includes national cohesion, identity formation, and the capacity of a state to project influence within its immediate region. A critical discourse analysis of Nigeria's language policy debates concluded that decisions about which languages to promote carry direct implications for national identity, educational outcomes, and socio-economic development, underscoring that language policy is itself a development policy rather than a purely educational or cultural one.

Theoretical Framework

This paper draws on two complementary theoretical perspectives. The first is Pierre Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital, which treats competence in a given language as a form of capital that can be converted into economic, social, or symbolic advantage depending on the market in which it is deployed. Within this framework, French functions in Nigeria as a form of capital whose value is realised specifically at the country's borders and in its regional transactions, where monolingual English competence loses much of its exchange value. The second is human capital theory, associated with economists such as Gary Becker, which conceives of education and skill acquisition, including language acquisition, as an investment that yields returns in the form of enhanced productivity, employability, and national output. Read together, these frameworks

suggest that French language education in Nigeria should be evaluated not only by its pedagogical outcomes within the classroom but by the economic and diplomatic returns it generates once graduates carry that competence into regional trade, diplomacy, security cooperation, and cross-border enterprise.

French Language in the Nigerian Policy Context

Nigeria's contemporary French language policy has its roots in the colonial language arrangements that were retained largely unchanged at independence in 1960, when English continued as the language of government, commerce, and formal education. It was not until the promulgation of the National Policy on Education in 1977, and subsequent revisions, that French began to acquire a distinct institutional standing, culminating in its designation as Nigeria's second official language and a compulsory subject at the primary and junior secondary levels, with elective status at the senior secondary level. The establishment of the Nigeria French Language Village in Badagry in 1992, later codified in law through the Nigeria French Language Village (Establishment) Act of 2021, represented a further institutional deepening of this commitment, providing an immersive environment in which undergraduates from Nigerian universities and Colleges of Education could achieve functional proficiency.

Despite these policy milestones, implementation has been markedly uneven. Scholarship examining French language education in Nigeria's North Central zone, which includes Kogi State, has documented persistent challenges of resourcing, teacher motivation, and curriculum delivery that limit the translation of policy commitment into widespread proficiency. This unevenness matters for national development because it means that the strategic value of French, which depends on a critical mass of proficient citizens, has not yet been fully realised at the scale the policy architecture anticipated.

Dimensions of French Language's Contribution to National Development

Regional Economic Integration and Trade

As Africa's largest economy, Nigeria conducts substantial trade with francophone neighbours such as Benin, Niger, and Cameroon, yet linguistic barriers frequently complicate cross-border negotiation, contract drafting, and engagement with legal and regulatory frameworks that operate in French. Recent Nigerian scholarship has argued that expanding French language competence among traders, customs officials, and business professionals could reduce these bottlenecks and unlock greater participation in regional trade, particularly within the framework of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), where French and English operate as co-official working languages. At a continental and global level, the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) provides platforms, including its Francophonie Economic Forum, through

which member and observer states coordinate economic policy, share investment opportunities, and build cross-linguistic business partnerships; a French-proficient Nigerian workforce is better positioned to access these platforms.

Diplomacy, Regional Security, and Cross-Border Cooperation

Nigeria's diplomatic and security engagements in West and Central Africa are conducted substantially in environments where French is the working language of counterpart governments, regional bodies, and security partners. Nigeria's leadership role within ECOWAS, and its participation in multinational security arrangements addressing cross-border insurgency and organised crime in the Lake Chad Basin and along its borders with Benin, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, depend in part on the availability of Nigerian personnel and diplomats capable of operating in French. Limited French proficiency among security and diplomatic personnel constrains the speed and quality of intelligence-sharing, joint operational planning, and negotiation with francophone counterparts, making language competence a component of national security capacity rather than a merely cultural asset.

Education and Human Capital Formation

French language education contributes to human capital formation both directly, by equipping graduates with a marketable skill, and indirectly, by exposing learners to francophone African literature, history, and pedagogy that broaden their intellectual and cultural repertoire. Nigerian teacher-training institutions, including Colleges of Education such as the Federal College of Education, Okene, play a central role in this process by producing the French language teachers who sustain instruction at the basic and secondary levels. Recent scholarship on the future of French language education in Nigeria has highlighted the growing role of digital tools, including mobile-assisted language learning and blended instructional models, in strengthening learner engagement and communicative competence, while also cautioning that inclusivity and infrastructural readiness, particularly in less-resourced states, remain significant constraints on realising these gains at scale.

Socio-Cultural Exchange and Africa's Growing Francophone Weight

Global demographic trends reinforce the developmental relevance of French for Nigeria. According to the Observatoire de la langue française's most recent report, the number of French speakers worldwide has reached approximately 396 million, with nearly two-thirds of that population located in Africa, and more than 170 million learners across 36 countries received instruction in or through French in 2024. This demographic weight means that Africa, rather than France, is increasingly the centre of gravity of the francophone world, a shift that also carries cultural and political implications, as seen in Francophone African leaders' growing use of local

languages alongside French in official settings and ongoing debates about the colonial legacy embedded in francophone education systems. For Nigeria, this reframes French less as the language of a distant former coloniser and more as a living regional lingua franca connecting it to an expanding population of African neighbours, making socio-cultural exchange, student mobility, and cultural diplomacy increasingly realistic avenues of national development.

Challenges to Realising French Language's Developmental Potential in Nigeria

Despite the strategic importance of French to Nigeria's national development, several structural and institutional challenges continue to limit its effective utilisation as an instrument of educational, economic, diplomatic, and regional development. One of the most significant challenges is the shortage and uneven distribution of qualified French language teachers. Recent studies indicate that inadequate numbers of qualified teachers, insufficient teaching resources, and weak financial support remain major constraints to effective French language education in Nigeria. These challenges are particularly significant because the successful implementation of language policy depends not only on official recognition but also on the availability of appropriately trained teachers and supportive learning environments (Adebayo et al., 2024; Akinpelu & Yegblemenawo, 2023).

A second challenge is inadequate educational infrastructure and technological resources. Effective contemporary language learning increasingly depends on access to language laboratories, computers, multimedia resources, digital learning platforms, electricity, and internet connectivity. However, research on French language teaching in Nigerian tertiary institutions indicates that the application of technology remains constrained by infrastructural and institutional limitations (Ohanma et al., 2024). Similarly, recent work on French education in Nigeria emphasises the need to exploit digital technologies and innovative pedagogies to improve learner engagement, communicative competence, and access to learning resources (Arowosadini, 2024).

Another major constraint is the relatively low perception and prestige of French among some Nigerian learners and members of the public. English occupies a dominant position in Nigeria's educational, governmental, commercial, and professional environments. Consequently, some learners perceive French as less immediately useful and may approach its study mainly as an academic requirement rather than as an important form of human capital. Recent Nigerian research identifies low student motivation and poor public perception as continuing challenges to French language acquisition (Adebayo et al., 2024; Daramola & Udogu, 2025). This perception can reduce students' commitment to developing the high level of communicative competence required to use French effectively in professional and international contexts.

Furthermore, there is a weak connection between French language education and identifiable labour-market opportunities. Although French proficiency can potentially contribute to careers in

diplomacy, international trade, customs, immigration, tourism, translation and interpretation, education, and regional cooperation, these opportunities are not always sufficiently integrated into French language programmes. Arowosadini (2024) argues for a repositioning of French education in Nigeria so that it is more closely connected with economic needs and the development of a globally competitive workforce. Similarly, initiatives aimed at improving the employability of young Nigerians through specialised French demonstrate the growing recognition that language education should be connected to professional and economic opportunities.

The gap between language policy and practical implementation remains a major challenge. The Federal Ministry of Education indicates that French was declared Nigeria's second official language in 1996 and that government has undertaken initiatives to support its implementation. However, recent scholarship argues that the policy has not been fully translated into consistent institutional practice and that significant challenges remain in teacher provision, instructional resources, and implementation across educational levels (Akinpelu & Yegblemenawo, 2023; Benjamin & Babalola, 2025).

Policy and Pedagogical Recommendations

Addressing these challenges requires coordinated action involving government, educational institutions, teachers, employers, and international partners. The Federal and State Ministries of Education should strengthen the practical implementation of Nigeria's French-language policy. Policy commitments should be accompanied by dedicated funding for the recruitment, equitable deployment, training, and retention of qualified French teachers, particularly in underserved areas. This is important because the existence of a policy framework alone cannot guarantee effective language acquisition without adequate human and material resources (Akinpelu & Yegblemenawo, 2023; Adebayo et al., 2024).

Colleges of Education and universities should strengthen partnerships with the Nigeria French Language Village and francophone institutions in neighbouring countries. Such partnerships can facilitate immersion programmes, staff exchanges, professional development, collaborative research, and authentic language-learning experiences. The Nigeria French Language Village already has an institutional mandate connected with the training and retraining of French teachers and serves as a coordinating centre for regional French-language networks.

French language curricula should incorporate context-appropriate digital and blended-learning strategies. Given Nigeria's unequal access to electricity and high-speed internet, technology integration should not depend exclusively on sophisticated infrastructure. Mobile-assisted learning, downloadable audio and video materials, offline resources, asynchronous platforms, and other low-bandwidth technologies can extend language learning beyond the classroom. Recent studies specifically identify technology integration as an emerging opportunity for improving

French teaching and learning in Nigerian educational institutions (Adebayo et al., 2024; Ohanma et al., 2024).

French language education should be deliberately connected to employment and professional development. Curriculum planners should introduce practical modules exposing learners to the use of French in diplomacy, international trade, customs administration, immigration, tourism, translation and interpretation, journalism, education, and cross-border cooperation. Internship and mentoring arrangements with relevant government agencies, international organisations, businesses, and diplomatic institutions could further enable students to convert linguistic competence into employable skills. This approach is consistent with recent calls to reposition French education as a pathway to economic opportunity rather than merely an academic subject (Arowosadini, 2024).

Conclusion

The relationship between French language competence and national development in Nigeria is neither incidental nor merely academic; it is structural, rooted in Nigeria's geography as an anglophone state encircled by francophone neighbours and in the country's stated policy commitment to French as a second official language. Realising the developmental potential of this commitment, however, requires moving beyond the symbolic recognition of French toward sustained investment in teacher capacity, digital infrastructure, and institutional pathways that connect language competence to trade, diplomacy, security, and cultural exchange. As francophone Africa's demographic and economic weight continues to grow, Nigeria's capacity to engage fluently with its regional environment will depend increasingly on the strength of its French language education system. Positioning French not as a peripheral school subject but as a deliberate instrument of national development offers Nigeria a pathway to deeper regional integration and a stronger voice within the West African and francophone spheres.

Recommendations

1. The Federal and State Ministries of Education should move beyond the formal recognition of French and ensure effective implementation of the language policy through adequate funding, monitoring, curriculum support, and institutional accountability. Dedicated budgetary provisions should be made for French-language education, particularly in states and institutions where the subject is poorly resourced.
2. Government should increase the recruitment and equitable distribution of professionally qualified French teachers, especially in rural and under-resourced schools. Regular in-service training should also be organised to expose teachers to contemporary communicative, task-based, technology-supported, and learner-centred approaches to French-language teaching.

3. Colleges of Education, universities, and secondary schools should be provided with functional language laboratories, textbooks, audio-visual materials, computers, internet facilities, and other digital resources. Particular attention should be given to institutions in less-resourced areas where inadequate infrastructure currently limits effective language acquisition.
4. French programmes should increasingly employ mobile-assisted language learning, educational applications, online learning platforms, digital audio-visual materials, and blended-learning approaches. However, digital strategies should be designed around Nigeria's infrastructural realities by incorporating low-bandwidth and offline resources so that students without reliable internet access are not excluded.

Nigeria should reposition French from a predominantly curricular subject to a strategic national-development skill. The paper demonstrates that its potential value extends to education, human-capital formation, regional trade, diplomacy, security, employment, and socio-cultural exchange. Therefore, government, educational institutions, and relevant private-sector stakeholders should adopt an integrated approach that combines policy implementation, teacher development, modern infrastructure, digital technology, immersive learning, and clear career pathways. Such an approach would help translate Nigeria's long-standing policy commitment to French into measurable developmental outcomes.

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