
THE ROLE OF FRENCH LANGUAGE EDUCATION AS A KEY FACTOR FOR SUSTAINABLE NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR LITERACY IN THE 21ST CENTURY.

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Abstract

Language education remains central to sustainable development and literacy in the 21st century. This paper examines the role of French language education as a strategic driver of national development, particularly in multilingual and multicultural contexts such as Africa. French, as an international and regional lingua franca, facilitates cross-border trade, diplomacy, education, and cultural exchange. The study highlights the relevance of French for enhancing literacy through bilingual education models, improving educational outcomes, and aligning with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education. Furthermore, the paper underscores the economic and cultural advantages of French in fostering cooperation within the Francophonie community. Despite challenges such as resource constraints, competition with English, and balancing local language equity, the findings suggest that strengthening French language education can significantly contribute to sustainable national development. Policy recommendations include prioritizing bilingual models, investing in teacher training, and leveraging international partnerships to support literacy and long-term growth.

Keywords: French Language Education; Literacy; Sustainable Development; 21st Century Education; Multilingualism; National Development; Francophonie; Bilingual Education; SDGs; Africa

Introduction

In the 21st century, literacy is not only about the ability to read and write but also about acquiring the communicative, cultural, and digital competencies necessary for participation in a globalized world. Literacy is widely recognized as a foundation for sustainable national development, as it equips individuals with the skills to access knowledge, engage in socio-economic activities, and contribute to national progress (UNESCO, 2016). Without a strong literacy base, nations face limitations in areas such as innovation, governance, education, and cross-border cooperation. Language education, therefore, plays a central role in advancing literacy because language is the medium through which knowledge is transmitted, shared, and preserved. Beyond communication, language education fosters intercultural understanding, social integration, and economic competitiveness. French, in particular, occupies a unique place among world languages due to its wide geographical spread and institutional importance. As one of the six official languages of the United Nations and the working language of multiple international organizations, French serves as a bridge for cooperation among nations. In Africa, where over 20 countries have French as an official language, the relevance of French extends beyond cultural ties to economic integration, education, and diplomacy. For a country like Nigeria bordered by French-speaking nations such as Benin, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon the ability to communicate in French is not just an academic skill but a strategic necessity. Thus, strengthening French language education can empower individuals, improve national literacy outcomes, and foster sustainable socio-economic development in the 21st century (Odudigbo & Musa, 2024).

The Strategic Importance of French Language Education

1. International and Geopolitical Relevance

French is one of the most influential international languages, spoken by over 300 million people across five continents and recognized as an official or working language in more than 32 countries (Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie [OIF], 2022). It is the second most widely learned foreign language after English and holds institutional importance in organizations such as the United Nations, African Union (AU), European Union (EU), International Olympic Committee, and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). For Nigeria, which plays a leading role in regional and continental affairs, mastery of French is crucial for effective participation in international diplomacy, security cooperation, and trade negotiations. For instance, ECOWAS headquartered in Abuja uses both English and French as its working

languages, making bilingual proficiency indispensable for smooth communication and decision-making. Failure to prioritize French language education limits Nigeria's influence and reduces its ability to harness the full benefits of regional integration (Abah, 2018). Moreover, in the current era of globalization, geopolitical relevance extends beyond traditional diplomacy. Nations that equip their citizens with internationally recognized languages, such as French, can better access global markets, attract foreign investments, and expand educational opportunities abroad. Thus, investing in French language education enhances not only literacy but also the international profile and competitiveness of a nation.

2. Regional Integration and Bilateral Relations

In West Africa, where Anglophone and Francophone countries coexist, French serves as a powerful tool for regional integration and bilateral cooperation. Nigeria shares borders with four Francophone countries Benin, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon making French language skills essential for cross-border trade, security collaboration, and cultural exchange. Unfortunately, studies reveal that the limited use of French in Nigeria has hindered bilateral relations and weakened the country's socio-economic ties with its neighbors (Odudigbo & Musa, 2024; Abah, 2018). For example, while trade within the ECOWAS sub-region is estimated to be worth billions of dollars annually, language barriers often slow down transactions, limit negotiations, and restrict Nigeria's participation in regional markets. Proficiency in French could help Nigerian entrepreneurs and policymakers tap into these markets more effectively. Additionally, cross-border issues such as terrorism, migration, and climate change require close cooperation between Anglophone and Francophone states, and this cooperation is often undermined by linguistic divides. Beyond economics and security, French also promotes cultural diplomacy. Shared language fosters mutual respect, cultural appreciation, and a sense of regional identity. By strengthening French education, Nigeria and other non-Francophone nations in Africa can deepen cooperation with Francophone partners, build stronger alliances, and advance collective sustainable development.

French Language Education as a Catalyst for Literacy and Development

Language education has always been at the heart of literacy initiatives, and in multilingual contexts such as Africa, the integration of global languages like French provides a strong catalyst for both literacy and national development. French language education not only develops communicative competence but also enhances access to scientific knowledge, international scholarship, and intercultural understanding. When strategically implemented, it empowers learners to navigate both local and global environments, thereby linking literacy to sustainable social and economic growth (UNESCO, 2016).

Enhancing Educational Outcomes through Bilingual Strategies

A growing body of research underscores the benefits of bilingual education, particularly in contexts where children begin schooling in their mother tongue while progressively acquiring a second or third language such as French. UNESCO has repeatedly emphasized that literacy outcomes improve significantly when students receive foundational education in their local languages and gradually transition into global languages (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2017). In Burkina Faso, for example, the adoption of a bilingual education model that combined mother-tongue instruction with French dramatically improved academic outcomes. Children enrolled in bilingual programs achieved higher literacy levels, recorded pass rates above the national average, and completed schooling faster than those in monolingual programs (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2017). These results demonstrate that the integration of French into bilingual education does not displace indigenous languages; rather, it complements them by enhancing learners' ability to operate in both local and international spheres. Furthermore, bilingual strategies reduce dropout rates and increase learner motivation. When students are first taught in a familiar language, they develop confidence and critical thinking skills. The gradual introduction of French as a second language ensures smoother transitions into higher levels of education, where French often becomes the medium of instruction for subjects such as science, technology, and international relations. This dual approach not only improves literacy but also equips learners with the tools to thrive in a competitive, globalized world.

Strengthening Early Learning Foundations

Early childhood and primary education represent critical stages in the literacy and cognitive development of children. Introducing French at this foundational stage provides long-term benefits by embedding language acquisition into the natural learning processes of young learners. Scholars argue that early exposure to French enhances pronunciation, vocabulary retention, and overall proficiency, thereby laying a solid foundation for future academic success (Saleh, 2019). In Nigeria, where English is the official language but French is increasingly important due to geographical and diplomatic realities, researchers emphasize the need to introduce French early in the curriculum. Studies show that students who encounter French only at the secondary or tertiary level often struggle to achieve fluency because the critical period for language acquisition has already passed (Odudigbo & Musa, 2024). By contrast, those exposed to French in primary school are more likely to develop lasting competence and confidence in using the language. Moreover, strengthening early learning foundations through French education contributes to broader educational transformation. It prepares learners to engage in regional and international opportunities, fosters intercultural awareness, and nurtures adaptability in a fast-changing world. The Journal of Language and Literacy Education (JOLLEDU, 2018) stresses that French should

not be treated as an optional subject but as an essential component of national educational policy, particularly in regions where proximity to Francophone countries makes French proficiency a socio-economic asset. Additionally, early integration of French supports literacy in other academic disciplines. Children proficient in more than one language often demonstrate higher levels of metalinguistic awareness, problem-solving ability, and academic performance. Thus, the inclusion of French in early education not only improves literacy rates but also equips learners with the cognitive flexibility required for lifelong learning and sustainable development.

Economic Impact and Cultural Integration

French language education contributes not only to literacy and academic achievement but also to the socio-economic and cultural fabric of nations. In an increasingly globalized world, linguistic competencies are directly linked to trade, diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, and international cooperation. For countries in Africa and beyond, French has emerged as a strategic language that strengthens both economic opportunities and cultural integration.

Boosting Trade and Economic Prosperity

Language plays a critical role in facilitating commerce and strengthening trade partnerships. Economic analysis reveals that a shared language, such as French, is not merely a cultural advantage but a powerful economic asset. Studies indicate that countries sharing a common language experience, on average, an 18% increase in trade flows and a 4.2% rise in per capita income (Grin, 2019). These findings highlight the economic dividends of language alignment within trade blocs. For West Africa, the importance of French is particularly evident. Nigeria, Africa's largest economy, conducts substantial trade with Francophone neighbors such as Benin, Niger, and Cameroon. However, linguistic barriers often hinder the effectiveness of such interactions. Nigerian exporters, for example, frequently face challenges in cross-border negotiations, contracts, and legal frameworks due to limited proficiency in French (Odudigbo & Musa, 2024). Expanding French language education could resolve such bottlenecks, thereby unlocking greater opportunities in regional trade. At the global level, organizations like the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) create platforms where member states can coordinate economic policies, share best practices, and attract investments. Summits such as the Francophonie Economic Forum bring together business leaders, policymakers, and educators to foster cooperation across language boundaries. This not only promotes growth but also allows developing nations to access new markets through the shared medium of French. Moreover, proficiency in French enhances employment prospects for individuals, particularly in sectors such as international business, tourism, aviation, and diplomacy. Bilingual professionals are in higher demand and often earn better incomes because they can operate across linguistic and cultural

contexts. Thus, French education equips citizens with economic resilience in a competitive 21st-century workforce.

Cultural Diplomacy and Global Collaboration

Beyond economics, French serves as a powerful tool of cultural diplomacy. The International Organisation of La Francophonie (OIF), which brings together 88 member and observer states across five continents, positions French not just as a language but as a vehicle for democracy, human rights, education, and sustainable development (OIF, 2022). Through its initiatives, the OIF supports cultural diversity, promotes artistic expression, and funds educational programs in member states. Cultural diplomacy, facilitated by the French language, helps nations project soft power. For instance, African countries that actively participate in Francophonie programs benefit from international cultural exchanges, scholarships, and research collaborations. By promoting French, countries strengthen their cultural identity while gaining visibility in global forums. Furthermore, French language education fosters a sense of global citizenship. Learners exposed to French are able to access diverse worldviews, literature, and artistic traditions, making them more adaptable in multicultural environments. This fosters mutual respect and peaceful coexistence, which are essential ingredients for sustainable development in a globalized century.

Aligning with Global Educational and Development Goals

French language education aligns closely with international frameworks designed to promote literacy, sustainability, and inclusive development. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) framework highlight the centrality of education in creating just, peaceful, and sustainable societies.

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) & SDG 4.7

The UNESCO Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) initiative emphasizes the need for education that equips learners with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to tackle global challenges such as poverty, climate change, and inequality. Within this framework, language education plays a key role because it enables access to knowledge and promotes cross-cultural dialogue. Specifically, SDG Target 4.7 states that “by 2030, all learners should acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity” (UNESCO, 2016). French language education directly supports this goal by promoting multicultural understanding, regional cooperation, and literacy development in diverse societies.

By integrating French into educational systems, countries can better prepare learners to engage with international institutions, access research published in French, and contribute to global knowledge-sharing. This fosters not just literacy but also sustainable mindsets that align with the broader SDG framework.

Promoting Literacy through Inclusive Language Policies

Inclusive language policies are central to educational equity. UNESCO and other global education advocates recommend the use of multilingual approaches that combine global languages like French with local mother tongues. This ensures that learners do not lose cultural identity while also acquiring international competencies. In Africa, inclusive language education helps address inequalities by ensuring that children from rural or minority linguistic backgrounds have equal opportunities to succeed. For instance, bilingual programs that integrate French with indigenous languages have been shown to improve literacy rates, reduce dropouts, and foster social cohesion (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2017). Moreover, inclusive policies bridge the gap between tradition and modernity. By learning French alongside local languages, learners are positioned to thrive in both local communities and international environments. This dual capacity strengthens social equity and contributes to sustainable societal development. In this way, French language education becomes more than a subject in school it becomes a strategic tool for building inclusive, literate, and globally competitive societies in the 21st century.

Challenges and Considerations

Despite the potential benefits of French language education in driving literacy and national development, several challenges persist that must be carefully considered:

Resource Constraints

The effective implementation of French language education requires substantial investment in teacher training, classroom infrastructure, and the provision of updated curricular resources. In many African countries, education budgets are already overstretched, leaving limited room for foreign language programs. According to UNESCO (2019), teacher shortages and underfunded language programs remain pressing issues in Sub-Saharan Africa. Without adequate financial commitment, initiatives to expand French literacy risk being unsustainable, particularly in rural and disadvantaged communities where basic literacy resources are already scarce.

Competition with English and Global Languages

English has gained prominence globally as the dominant language of science, technology, international trade, and digital communication. In many Francophone and Francophile regions including parts of West Africa, parents and policymakers increasingly prioritize English

education for its perceived economic advantages. This trend creates competition and tension with French, potentially diminishing its perceived relevance in national education systems (Bokamba, 2019). If not carefully managed, French may be relegated to secondary status, reducing its effectiveness as a tool for regional integration and sustainable literacy promotion.

Language Equity and Cultural Identity Dynamics

Another major challenge lies in balancing French with indigenous languages to avoid reinforcing linguistic hierarchies that marginalize local identities. Overemphasis on French without recognition of mother tongues may alienate students, hinder comprehension, and reproduce colonial legacies of language domination. Scholars argue that sustainable literacy development requires inclusive multilingual education policies that integrate French alongside indigenous languages to preserve cultural identity and social equity (Bamgbose, 2018). Striking this balance is essential to ensure French serves as an empowering tool rather than an exclusionary one.

Pedagogical and Methodological Barriers

Even where policies support French language instruction, classroom practices often lag behind. Teachers may lack the advanced proficiency or pedagogical skills necessary to deliver effective bilingual education. Furthermore, traditional rote-learning approaches can limit student engagement and communicative competence in French. This mismatch between policy intent and classroom realities undermines literacy outcomes, highlighting the need for modernized, learner-centered methodologies (Adegbite, 2020).

Recommendations

To maximize the role of French language education as a driver of sustainable national development and literacy, a number of strategic recommendations can be made:

1. Policy Prioritization

Governments must elevate French language education within national education policies. This includes embedding French in early childhood and primary curricula to ensure long-term proficiency and literacy development. Policy frameworks should also align with broader educational strategies such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4), which emphasize inclusive and quality education for all.

2. Adopt Bilingual Education Models

Evidence from countries like Burkina Faso shows that integrating bilingual education beginning with instruction in mother tongues and gradually introducing French leads to higher literacy rates, improved comprehension, and reduced dropout levels (UNESCO, 2018). Policymakers should institutionalize such models, adapting them to local contexts while ensuring cultural sensitivity.

3. Invest in Teacher Capacity and Professional Development

Teachers are central to the success of French education. Investment in specialized training programs should focus not only on enhancing French language proficiency but also on modern bilingual pedagogy, interactive methodologies, and the integration of digital learning tools. Continuous professional development programs should be prioritized to keep educators updated with best practices in multilingual education.

4. Strengthen International and Regional Partnerships

Organizations such as the International Organisation of La Francophonie (OIF) and UNESCO can provide technical expertise, financial support, and curricular innovations. Governments should leverage these partnerships to access resources for teacher training, curriculum design, and evaluation mechanisms. Bilateral cooperation between Francophone and Anglophone countries can also enhance cross-regional learning.

5. Promote Inclusive Language Policies

To ensure equity, policies must integrate indigenous languages alongside French, preventing cultural displacement. This multilingual approach not only promotes literacy but also strengthens national cohesion by validating diverse linguistic identities. Advocacy campaigns can also raise awareness among parents and communities on the value of French education in tandem with local languages.

6. Monitor, Evaluate, and Report Progress

Finally, robust monitoring and evaluation systems should be established to assess the literacy and developmental outcomes of French language education programs. Data-driven insights will allow policymakers to refine approaches, allocate resources effectively, and measure contributions toward achieving national development plans and SDG targets.

Conclusion

French language education is not merely a linguistic endeavor but a strategic investment in the future of nations, particularly within Africa and other multilingual contexts. It serves as a transformative instrument for advancing literacy, fostering intercultural understanding, and bridging local communities with the global economy. As the 21st century continues to demand advanced communication skills, critical thinking, and global collaboration, French offers learners the opportunity to connect with over 300 million speakers worldwide, engage in international trade, diplomacy, and scientific research, while simultaneously reinforcing cultural diversity. Moreover, by aligning French language education with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), countries can achieve equitable, inclusive, and lifelong learning opportunities. Its

integration into bilingual and multilingual frameworks ensures that the promotion of French does not undermine local languages, but rather complements them in strengthening identity, literacy, and global competitiveness. However, challenges such as inadequate teacher training, limited funding, and the global dominance of English must be strategically addressed. Governments, educators, and international partners must collaborate to provide resources, foster policy reforms, and adopt innovative pedagogy that empowers learners to thrive in a globalized environment. Ultimately, embedding French as a cornerstone of literacy and development is not only an educational imperative but also a catalyst for sustainable national progress, cultural diplomacy, and regional integration in the 21st century.

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