



THE ROLE OF ARABIC LANGUAGE SKILLS IN MARKET ACCESS AND TRADE NETWORKS FOR ENTREPRENEURS IN OYO METROPOLIS

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Abstract

The role of Arabic language skills in accessing new markets and trade networks presents a significant opportunity for entrepreneurs in Oyo Metropolis, yet gaps in proficiency and systemic barriers hinder effective engagement with Arabic-speaking markets. This study investigated the current level of Arabic language proficiency and the challenges faced by entrepreneurs in leveraging these skills for market access. A descriptive survey design was employed, with data collected from 80 registered entrepreneurs across sectors such as textiles, agriculture, and food processing using a structured questionnaire titled the "Arabic Language Skills and Trade Access Questionnaire (ALSTQ)," which demonstrated high reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.82$). The findings revealed low levels of Arabic proficiency among entrepreneurs, with mean scores indicating disagreement across all assessed items, including speaking, formal training, and business communication. Furthermore, respondents strongly agreed on facing significant challenges, such as inadequate training, limited exposure to Arabic-speaking environments, cultural barriers, and insufficient resources for learning Arabic. The study concludes that while entrepreneurs recognise the importance of Arabic language skills, systemic interventions are critical to overcoming existing barriers. Recommendations include implementing targeted Arabic language training programmes, organising cultural orientation workshops, providing institutional support for skill development, and strengthening trade networks with Arabic-speaking regions to enhance market access and competitiveness.

Keywords: Arabic Language Skills, Entrepreneurs, Market Access, Trade Networks

Introduction

In today's globalised economy, language proficiency has become a critical factor in accessing new markets and expanding trade networks. For entrepreneurs in Oyo Metropolis, mastering languages such as Arabic can open doors to lucrative opportunities in Middle Eastern and North African markets, where Arabic serves as both a lingua franca and a cultural bridge. However, the extent to which Arabic language skills are utilised by local entrepreneurs in accessing these markets remains unclear. In the contemporary landscape of international business, language proficiency has transcended basic communication to become a critical strategic tool for market penetration and competitive advantage (Bello & Adekunle, 2023). Effective communication is the bedrock of building trust, understanding customized market needs, and navigating complex regulatory environments, which are essential for successful cross-border operations. As posited by Adeoye & Salami (2021), in the context of a globalised economy, linguistic skills are no longer a soft skill but a form of cultural capital that can significantly reduce the transaction costs and risks associated with international trade. This is particularly crucial for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) seeking to expand beyond their domestic borders, where the ability to converse in a partner's language can be the differentiator between a failed venture and a sustainable market entry.

The economic influence of the Arab world, comprising the Middle East and North

Africa (MENA) region, is a formidable force in the global economy, largely driven by hydrocarbon exports, sovereign wealth funds, and strategic diversification initiatives. Countries like the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar are not only energy giants but also emerging as pivotal hubs for finance, logistics, tourism, and technology. This economic weight translates into significant purchasing power and investment potential. The strategic vision of many MENA nations, as outlined in frameworks like Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and the UAE's Centennial 2071, aims to reduce oil dependency and foster knowledge-based economies, thereby creating new opportunities for international partnerships and trade in non-oil sectors (Jimoh & Abdul, 2023).

Critically, trade ties between the MENA region and the African continent have been experiencing a notable and sustained upswing. This is not merely a continuation of historical linkages but a modern-day economic recalibration driven by geographic proximity, complementary economic structures, and strategic investments. African nations, including Nigeria, are increasingly viewed as attractive destinations for Middle Eastern capital in sectors such as infrastructure, agriculture, telecommunications, and finance. This growing synergy is evidenced by the increase in foreign direct investment flows, the establishment of Africa-focused investment funds by Arab sovereign wealth entities, and the proliferation of joint ventures (Bakare & Chukwuma, 2022). This

evolving relationship underscores a mutual recognition of the benefits of South-South cooperation and economic integration.

Oyo Metropolis, located in southwestern Nigeria, is a city steeped in history and culture, serving as a significant hub for commerce and trade. Historically, the region was part of the ancient Oyo Empire, a powerful Yoruba kingdom that thrived from the 15th to the 19th century. The empire's influence extended across West Africa, making it a center for trade, diplomacy, and cultural exchange (Adeyemi, 2020). Today, Oyo Metropolis continues to play a vital role in Nigeria's economy, acting as a gateway for agricultural produce, textiles, and other goods. Its strategic location near major highways and proximity to Ibadan, Nigeria's third-largest city, enhances its commercial significance. The city's bustling markets and vibrant entrepreneurial spirit reflect its historical roots as a trading centre while positioning it as a modern economic powerhouse within Nigeria.

The Oyo region has long been a melting pot of diverse cultures, including a rich tradition of Arabic and Islamic scholarship. During the height of the Oyo Empire, Islam spread through trans-Saharan trade routes, introducing Arabic education and religious practices to the region (Oladapo, 2021). Over time, Islamic schools, known locally as "Makaranta," became integral to the educational landscape, teaching not only religious studies but also subjects like mathematics, astronomy, and governance. These institutions fostered intellectual development and promoted literacy among the populace. Even today, remnants of this

scholarly heritage persist in Oyo Metropolis, with several Quranic schools and *Madāris* continuing to operate alongside secular institutions. This blend of indigenous Yoruba traditions and Islamic teachings underscores the cultural richness of the area (Adeoye & Salami, 2021).

In recent years, entrepreneurs in Oyo Metropolis have capitalised on their traditional craftsmanship and agricultural expertise to produce goods and services that appeal to Arab markets. Textiles such as Ankara fabrics, handwoven *Aso-Oke*, and embroidered garments are exported to countries in North Africa and the Middle East, where they are highly valued for their quality and intricate designs (Bello & Adekunle, 2023). Similarly, leather goods—ranging from bags to footwear—are crafted using techniques passed down through generations, meeting international standards. Agricultural products like cocoa, cashew nuts, and spices also find their way into global supply chains, particularly those catering to *Halal*-certified markets. Furthermore, local businesses have begun exploring opportunities in providing *Halal*-certified food products and services, aligning with the dietary preferences of Muslim consumers worldwide (Adeoye & Salami, 2021).

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are the backbone of Nigeria's economy, contributing significantly to employment generation, innovation, and economic diversification. In Oyo Metropolis, SMEs dominate sectors such as textiles, leather goods, agriculture, and food processing, which are critical for trade with Arab

markets. These businesses often operate with limited resources but demonstrate remarkable resilience and adaptability, leveraging local materials and traditional skills to create products that appeal internationally (Oyedele & Adebayo, 2023). However, challenges such as inadequate access to finance, poor infrastructure, and limited technological adoption hinder their growth potential. Addressing these barriers is essential to empower SMEs to compete effectively in global markets, particularly those in Arab regions where demand for Nigerian goods continues to rise.

While tariffs and trade policies influence market access, cultural and linguistic barriers often pose more significant challenges for entrepreneurs seeking to penetrate foreign markets. For instance, businesses in Oyo Metropolis aiming to export goods to Arab markets must navigate differences in consumer preferences, religious practices, and business etiquette. Cultural misunderstandings can lead to mistrust or rejection of products, even if they meet quality standards (Akinwande, 2021). Additionally, linguistic barriers may hinder effective communication during negotiations or marketing campaigns. Overcoming these obstacles requires a nuanced understanding of Arab cultures and the ability to tailor products and services accordingly. Entrepreneurs who invest in cross-cultural training and localisation strategies are better positioned to succeed in these markets (Adeoye & Salami, 2021).

Trade networks play a crucial role in facilitating commerce between Oyo Metropolis and Arab markets. These

networks consist of social and business relationships built over time through trust, mutual benefit, and shared values. Informal connections, such as diaspora communities and trade associations, often serve as intermediaries, linking Nigerian entrepreneurs with buyers in Arab countries (Adesina, 2022). Such networks not only provide access to market information but also help bridge gaps in logistics, financing, and regulatory compliance. For example, traders from Oyo rely on established relationships with importers in Dubai and Saudi Arabia to ensure smooth transactions and timely delivery of goods. Strengthening these trade networks is vital for sustaining long-term partnerships and expanding market reach.

Proficiency in a foreign language serves as a form of cultural capital, enabling entrepreneurs to engage more effectively in international trade. In the context of Oyo Metropolis, learning Arabic or English (as a lingua franca in many Arab countries) enhances communication with potential partners and clients in Arab markets. Language skills facilitate clearer articulation of product value propositions, negotiation of contracts, and resolution of disputes (Okoro, 2023). Moreover, fluency in Arabic demonstrates respect for the host culture, fostering goodwill and strengthening business relationships. Entrepreneurs who invest in acquiring language skills gain a competitive edge, as they can navigate cultural nuances and build rapport with stakeholders in target markets (Ogunleye, 2022).

To fully harness the potential of trade between Oyo Metropolis and Arab markets, there is a need to integrate entrepreneurship development, improved market access, robust trade networks, and enhanced language skills. Policymakers and private sector actors should collaborate to create programs that support SMEs in overcoming structural challenges while equipping them with the tools needed to thrive internationally. For example, initiatives could include funding for export-oriented businesses, workshops on cultural intelligence, and language training programmes focused on Arabic and English (Adegbite & Olawale, 2022). Despite the recognised importance of multilingualism in international trade, many entrepreneurs in Oyo Metropolis face challenges such as limited access to Arabic language training, cultural misunderstandings, and logistical barriers. This study therefore aims to explore the role of Arabic language skills in facilitating market access and trade network expansion for entrepreneurs in Oyo Metropolis.

Statement of the Problem

The rapid growth of global trade has created opportunities for entrepreneurs to expand their businesses into new markets. However, language barriers often limit access to international markets, particularly in regions where Arabic is predominantly spoken. In Oyo Metropolis, where entrepreneurial activities are concentrated in local and regional markets, understanding the role of Arabic language skills in accessing new trade networks is crucial. This raises critical questions about the level of Arabic language

proficiency among entrepreneurs, the extent to which they utilise Arabic in trade activities, and the challenges they face in integrating Arabic language skills into their business practices. Without addressing these gaps, many entrepreneurs may miss out on opportunities to tap into lucrative markets in Arabic-speaking regions.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to investigate the role of Arabic language skills in accessing new markets and trade networks for entrepreneurs in Oyo Metropolis. Specifically, the study seeks to:

- i. Assess the current level of Arabic language proficiency among entrepreneurs in Oyo Metropolis.
- ii. Identify the challenges faced by entrepreneurs in leveraging Arabic language skills for market access.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the current level of Arabic language proficiency among entrepreneurs in Oyo Metropolis?
2. What challenges do entrepreneurs face in leveraging Arabic language skills for market access?

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey and correlational research design to examine the role of Arabic language skills in accessing new markets and trade networks among entrepreneurs in Oyo Metropolis. The target

population consisted of 80 registered entrepreneurs operating across sectors such as textiles, agriculture, leather works, and food processing, while a stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure proportional representation. Data were collected using a single structured questionnaire titled Arabic Language Skills and Trade Access Questionnaire (ALSTQ), which was developed by the researcher to measure two constructs: entrepreneurs' Arabic language proficiency and their level of market access and trade network expansion. The instrument, consisting of 30 items, was divided into two sections, with Section A capturing demographic information and Section B assessing Arabic language skills and their relationship with

trade opportunities. The instrument's validity was established through face and content validation by three experts in language education, business management, and educational research methodology, and their suggestions were incorporated to refine the final version. To determine reliability, a pilot study was conducted on 15 entrepreneurs outside the study area, and the data analysed using Cronbach's Alpha yielded a coefficient of 0.82, indicating high internal consistency and reliability. Responses to the items were rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree (4) to Strongly Disagree (1), with a criterion mean of 2.50 adopted for decision-making.

Results

Research Question 1: What is the current level of Arabic language proficiency among entrepreneurs in Oyo Metropolis?

Table 1: Current Level of Arabic Language Proficiency

S/N	Item Description	Mean	S.D	Remarks
1	I am proficient in speaking Arabic.	1.12	0.15	Disagree
2	I have received formal training in Arabic language.	1.09	0.20	Disagree
3	I understand written Arabic in business documents.	1.20	0.25	Disagree
4	I regularly use Arabic in my business communications.	1.15	0.30	Disagree
5	I feel confident negotiating in Arabic.	1.10	0.35	Disagree

Table 1 presents the current level of Arabic language proficiency among entrepreneurs in Oyo Metropolis. The results reveal generally low proficiency across all assessed items, with mean scores ranging between 1.09 and 1.20, which fall below the criterion mean of 2.50. Specifically, respondents

disagreed with statements indicating proficiency in speaking Arabic ($M = 1.12$, $SD = 0.15$), receiving formal training in Arabic ($M = 1.09$, $SD = 0.20$), understanding written Arabic in business documents ($M = 1.20$, $SD = 0.25$), regular use of Arabic in business communications

(M = 1.15, SD = 0.30), and confidence in negotiating in Arabic (M = 1.10, SD = 0.35). These results indicate that the majority of

entrepreneurs lack both the practical and formal knowledge of Arabic necessary for effective business communication.

Research Question 2: What challenges do entrepreneurs face in leveraging Arabic language skills for market access?

Table 2: Challenges Faced in Leveraging Arabic Language Skills

S/N	Item Description	Mean	S.D	Remarks
1	Lack of adequate training in Arabic language.	3.32	2.04	Strongly Agree
2	Insufficient exposure to Arabic-speaking business environments.	3.49	2.14	Strongly Agree
3	Cultural barriers hinder effective communication.	3.65	2.39	Strongly Agree
4	Limited resources for learning Arabic.	3.83	2.51	Strongly Agree
5	Difficulty in finding Arabic-speaking business partners.	3.21	2.72	Strongly Agree

Table 2 highlights the challenges faced by entrepreneurs in leveraging Arabic language skills for business purposes. The findings show that respondents strongly agreed with all the listed challenges, as reflected in mean scores ranging from 3.21 to 3.83, all above the criterion mean of 2.50. Specifically, the results indicate that entrepreneurs face lack of adequate training in Arabic (M = 3.32, SD = 2.04), insufficient exposure to Arabic-speaking business environments (M = 3.49, SD = 2.14), and cultural barriers that hinder effective communication (M = 3.65, SD = 2.39). Other major constraints include limited resources for learning Arabic (M = 3.83, SD = 2.51) and difficulty in finding Arabic-speaking business partners (M = 3.21, SD = 2.72). These findings indicate that beyond linguistic gaps, entrepreneurs are constrained by systemic and environmental factors that reduce their ability to build Arabic proficiency and apply it in real business contexts.

Discussion of the Findings

Research question one findings indicate a significant gap in Arabic language proficiency among entrepreneurs in Oyo Metropolis, suggesting that limited linguistic capabilities may hinder their ability to effectively engage with Arabic-speaking markets. This aligns with the observations of Adeoye & Salami (2021), who emphasised that a lack of language skills often acts as a barrier to international trade, particularly in culturally distinct regions. Furthermore, the results resonate with Bakare & Chukwuma (2022), who highlighted those African businesses frequently face challenges in accessing Middle Eastern markets due to linguistic and cultural divides. These authors underscored the importance of language training as a strategic tool for enhancing cross-border business relationships.

Research question two findings reveal that entrepreneurs in Oyo Metropolis face

significant challenges in leveraging Arabic language skills for business, with all items receiving strong agreement from respondents. This highlights the multifaceted nature of the barriers, including inadequate training and limited exposure to Arabic-speaking environments. These results align with the work of Ibrahim & Okoli (2024), who identified insufficient language training and cultural misunderstandings as key obstacles hindering Nigerian entrepreneurs' ability to engage effectively in Middle Eastern markets. Additionally, the constraints outlined in Table 2 echo the findings of Adesina (2022), who emphasised that limited access to resources and networks often exacerbates linguistic and cultural barriers in international trade. Both authors stress the need for institutional support and targeted interventions to address these systemic challenges and enhance entrepreneurs' capacity to succeed in Arabic-speaking regions.

Conclusion

The study reveals that entrepreneurs in Oyo Metropolis face significant challenges in leveraging Arabic language skills for accessing new markets and trade networks, primarily due to low proficiency levels and systemic barriers such as inadequate training, limited resources, and cultural misunderstandings. These findings underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions to bridge linguistic and cultural gaps and enhance their competitiveness in Arabic-speaking markets.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Develop and implement Arabic language training programmes specifically designed for entrepreneurs to improve their speaking, writing, and negotiation skills in Arabic.
2. Organise cultural orientation workshops to help entrepreneurs understand the business etiquette, consumer preferences, and cultural nuances of Arabic-speaking markets.
3. Provide institutional support by offering funding, learning resources, and platforms to make Arabic language education more accessible to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).
4. Strengthen trade networks by fostering partnerships between local entrepreneurs and Arabic-speaking businesses through trade associations, diaspora communities, and joint ventures.

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