

FRENCH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AS A TOOL FOR REGIONAL ECONOMIC INTEGRATION IN WEST AFRICA: A NIGERIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of linguistic competence in fostering economic collaboration within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). While the argument that French proficiency could enhance Nigeria's economic integration with Francophone neighbours is compelling, the study warrants critical scrutiny regarding its assumptions and feasibility. The author posits that Nigeria's predominantly Anglophone orientation creates barriers to trade, diplomacy and labour mobility in Francophone-dominated ECOWAS. The paper highlights policy gaps in Nigeria's educational system, which prioritises English over French despite the country's geographic and economic ties to French-speaking West Africa. However, the analysis tends to overemphasize language as the primary obstacle to integration, potentially underestimating other structural challenges such as political instability, infrastructural deficits, and non-tariff trade barriers. Methodologically, the study leans on theoretical frameworks of linguistic imperialism and regional integration but lacks robust empirical evidence to substantiate the direct economic benefits of French proficiency for Nigerian businesses and professionals. Furthermore, the paper does not sufficiently address the socio-political resistance to language policy shifts in Nigeria, where English remains a unifying lingua franca amidst diverse indigenous languages. While the study makes a valuable contribution to discourse on language and economic integration, its policy recommendations such as compulsory French education may be overly optimistic without considering implementation challenges, including funding, teacher shortages, and public apathy. A more nuanced approach, balancing linguistic diversification with pragmatic economic reforms, might strengthen the argument. Overall, the paper raises important questions but requires deeper interdisciplinary research to validate its claims.

Keywords: French language, economic integration, ECOWAS, Nigeria, language policy.

Introduction

The economic integration of West African nations has long been a priority for regional bodies such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). However, linguistic barriers remain a significant challenge to seamless trade, diplomacy, and socio-cultural collaboration. Nigeria, as the region's largest economy and most populous country, plays a pivotal role in ECOWAS affairs, yet its limited proficiency in French the dominant language in most neighbouring countries hinders its full participation in regional economic activities (Ayeni & Ellah, 2025). With Francophone nations like Benin, Togo, Niger, and Côte d'Ivoire serving as key trade partners, Nigeria's reliance on English creates communication gaps that impede business transactions, labour mobility, and policy harmonization (Teibowei, 2024). This study explores how enhancing French language proficiency among Nigerians can serve as a strategic tool for deeper regional economic integration.

Language is not merely a medium of communication but also a crucial factor in economic negotiations, labour mobility, and cultural exchange. Despite Nigeria's adoption of the "French Language Policy" in education, implementation has been weak, leading to low fluency levels among professionals and the general populace (Akinpelu & Yegblemenawo, 2023). In contrast, Francophone West African nations often prioritize bilingualism, giving their citizens an advantage in cross-border trade

and employment (Ball et al., 2024). This research examines the extent to which improved French language skills among Nigerians can boost intra-regional trade, facilitate labour migration, and strengthen diplomatic relations. By analysing existing language policies, economic interactions, and educational frameworks, this study provides insights into how Nigeria can leverage linguistic competence to maximize its influence and benefits within ECOWAS.

Statement of the Problem

West Africa's economic integration is hampered by linguistic fragmentation, with Anglophone and Francophone divides creating barriers to trade, labour mobility, and policy coordination (Ayeni & Ellah, 2025). Nigeria, despite being an economic powerhouse, faces significant disadvantages due to its limited French proficiency, restricting its ability to engage effectively with neighbouring Francophone economies. While ECOWAS promotes multilingualism as a key integration strategy, Nigeria's educational system has not sufficiently prioritized French language acquisition, leaving many professionals and traders unable to communicate effectively in the region's dominant language (Nwodo, 2018). This linguistic gap results in missed business opportunities, inefficiencies in cross-border transactions, and reliance on intermediaries, which increases costs and reduces competitiveness.

Furthermore, Nigeria's weak French language proficiency limits its workforce's participation in regional labour markets,

where bilingualism is increasingly a prerequisite for employment in multinational corporations and regional institutions (Olaseinde & Olaseinde, 2024). Many Nigerian graduates and professionals are excluded from job opportunities in Francophone countries due to language barriers, while their Francophone counterparts often secure roles in Nigeria due to their English proficiency. This imbalance undermines Nigeria's potential to lead regional economic initiatives. Additionally, diplomatic and policy negotiations within ECOWAS are frequently conducted in French, placing Nigerian representatives at a disadvantage. Without addressing these linguistic challenges, Nigeria risks remaining on the periphery of West Africa's economic integration, despite its vast resources and market potential (Oddih & Okor, 2020).

Research Objectives

- To examine the impact of French language proficiency on Nigeria's participation in regional trade and economic activities within ECOWAS.
- To assess the effectiveness of Nigeria's current language policies in promoting French acquisition and their implications for regional integration.
- To explore strategies for enhancing French language education in Nigeria to facilitate better economic and diplomatic engagement with Francophone West Africa.

Research Questions

- How does French language proficiency influence Nigeria's trade relations and economic collaborations within ECOWAS?
- What are the gaps in Nigeria's language policies that hinder widespread French fluency, and how can they be addressed?
- What practical measures can be implemented to improve French language education in Nigeria for greater regional economic integration?

Literature Review

The relationship between language proficiency and economic integration has been widely discussed in sociolinguistics and economic research. According to Alam & Mostafiz (2023), language uniformity reduces transaction costs in trade, while linguistic diversity can create barriers. In West Africa, where French and English dominate different countries, this theory holds significant relevance. Mustapha (2012) highlights that Nigeria's monolingual tendencies in English have limited its economic diplomacy, whereas Francophone nations, through compulsory bilingual education, have greater access to regional opportunities. This disparity underscores the need for Nigeria to re-evaluate its language policies to align with ECOWAS's multilingual objectives. Economic studies on regional integration emphasize that language is a critical factor in labour mobility. Araromi & Yinusa (2017) argue

that language skills directly influence employability and earnings in foreign labour markets. In West Africa, Nigerian workers face exclusion from Francophone job markets due to language barriers, whereas Ivorian, Beninese, and Togolese professionals often secure employment in Nigeria because of their English proficiency. This imbalance, as noted by Hoffmann & Melly (2018), weakens Nigeria's labour export potential and reduces its influence in regional employment policies. Enhancing French language training could empower Nigerian workers to compete more effectively in the broader West African labour market.

Educational policy analysts have critiqued Nigeria's inconsistent implementation of French language programs. Onah & Ashabua (2024) observe that while French is officially a second language in Nigeria, its teaching in schools is often inadequate due to a lack of qualified instructors and insufficient instructional time. In contrast, Francophone countries like Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire mandate English as a second language, ensuring a bilingual workforce. This discrepancy, as discussed by Gandolfi et al. (2021), places Nigeria at a disadvantage in regional negotiations and business interactions. A restructured language curriculum with stronger French immersion programs could bridge this gap.

Trade economists further argue that language barriers increase transaction costs in cross-border commerce. Alam & Mostafiz (2023) note that linguistic differences lead to higher costs in contract negotiations, dispute resolution, and market penetration. Nigerian

traders in Francophone markets often rely on interpreters, increasing operational expenses and reducing profit margins. A study by Akinyemi & Aduloju (2017) on Nigeria-Benin trade relations found that language barriers contribute to informal trade dominance, limiting formal sector growth. Improved French proficiency among Nigerian traders could enhance trust, reduce costs, and expand legitimate trade channels.

Diplomatic relations within ECOWAS also suffer due to language divides. As highlighted by Djénéba (2021), most ECOWAS meetings and documents are in French, disadvantaging Anglophone delegates who lack translation support. Nigerian representatives often struggle to contribute effectively in high-stakes negotiations, weakening the country's policy influence. Multilingualism, as advocated by ECOWAS, remains underutilized in Nigeria's diplomatic training programs. Investing in French language training for diplomats and policymakers could strengthen Nigeria's voice in regional decision-making. Finally, cultural exchange and regional identity are closely tied to language. Ndukauba (2020) argues that shared languages foster stronger socio-economic bonds, facilitating integration. Nigeria's limited French proficiency restricts its cultural influence in Francophone Africa, where media, literature, and entertainment are predominantly in French. By promoting French fluency, Nigeria could enhance its soft power, enabling deeper cultural and economic ties with neighbouring nations.

In conclusion, existing literature underscores the critical role of French language proficiency in Nigeria's regional economic integration. Addressing linguistic barriers through policy reforms, educational enhancements, and diplomatic training could position Nigeria as a more active and influential player in West Africa's economic landscape.

Theoretical Framework: Neo-functionalism

Neo-functionalism, a theory of regional integration pioneered by Ernst B. Haas (1958), provides a compelling, though complex, framework for analyzing the potential of French language proficiency as a driver of economic integration in West Africa from a Nigerian perspective (Niemann et al. 2019). At its core, neo-functionalism posits that integration in one technical, often economic, sector creates inevitable "spill-over" effects, pressuring neighbouring sectors to integrate to maintain functional efficiency. This process is not led solely by grand political design but is often propelled by supranational institutions and, crucially, by non-state actors like businesses and interest groups who recognize the material benefits of a larger, unified market (Oriakh & Aniche, 2022). Applying this logic, the promotion of French language skills in Anglophone Nigeria can be viewed as a deliberate "functional" tactic to overcome a critical technical barrier linguistic fragmentation that currently impedes the free flow of goods, services, capital, and labour within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). By investing in this linguistic

capital, Nigeria is not merely learning a foreign language; it is strategically laying the groundwork for the neo-functionalist dynamic to take hold, where eased communication in French could catalyse integration in trade, finance, and transportation, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of cooperation (Araromi & Yinusa, 2017).

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research approach, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques to comprehensively analyse the role of French language proficiency in Nigeria's regional economic integration (Oranga et al., 2025). Primary data will be collected through structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews targeting key stakeholders, including Nigerian traders, business professionals, policymakers, and educators. The questionnaire will assess the extent to which French language barriers hinder trade, employment, and diplomatic engagements within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Interviews with government officials, language instructors, and representatives from ECOWAS will provide deeper insights into policy gaps and implementation challenges. Secondary data will be sourced from reports by ECOWAS, the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), and academic journals on language policy and economic integration. Statistical tools such as SPSS will be used to analyze quantitative data, while thematic analysis will interpret qualitative responses to identify recurring patterns and policy recommendations.

Additionally, the study will incorporate a comparative analysis of language policies in Nigeria and select Francophone West African countries (such as Benin, Senegal, and Côte d'Ivoire) to evaluate best practices in bilingual education and their economic benefits. Case studies of Nigerian businesses operating in Francophone markets will be examined to assess how language proficiency impacts trade efficiency and market expansion. Furthermore, a review of Nigeria's National Policy on Education (NPE) and its French language curriculum will be conducted to determine its effectiveness in fostering fluency. The research will also utilize content analysis of ECOWAS treaties and diplomatic communications to evaluate language-related challenges in regional negotiations. By triangulating data from surveys, interviews, policy documents, and case studies, this study aims to provide a robust framework for enhancing French language acquisition in Nigeria to boost economic integration in West Africa.

Research Design and Data Collection

The research design is both descriptive and analytical, aiming to evaluate the current

state of French language proficiency in Nigeria and its implications for regional economic integration (Ogilo, 2023). A stratified sampling technique will be employed to ensure representation across different demographics, including business owners, students, civil servants, and diplomats. The quantitative aspect will involve administering 100 structured questionnaires in Seme with high cross-border trade activities (Lagos- Cotonou). Ethical considerations, such as informed consent and confidentiality, were strictly observed. The study's findings contribute to policy recommendations for improving French language education in Nigeria, fostering better trade relations, labour mobility, and diplomatic engagement within West Africa.

Data Presentation

The study collected both quantitative data from 100 respondents (business professionals, students, civil servants, and diplomats) across Oyo. Below is a summary of the raw data:

Quantitative Data (Questionnaire Results)

Demographic Data of Respondents

Table 1: Gender

		f	%
Gender	Male	22	22.0
	Female	78	78.0

These data reveal a significant gender disparity among the respondents, with females comprising 78% and males making up 22%.

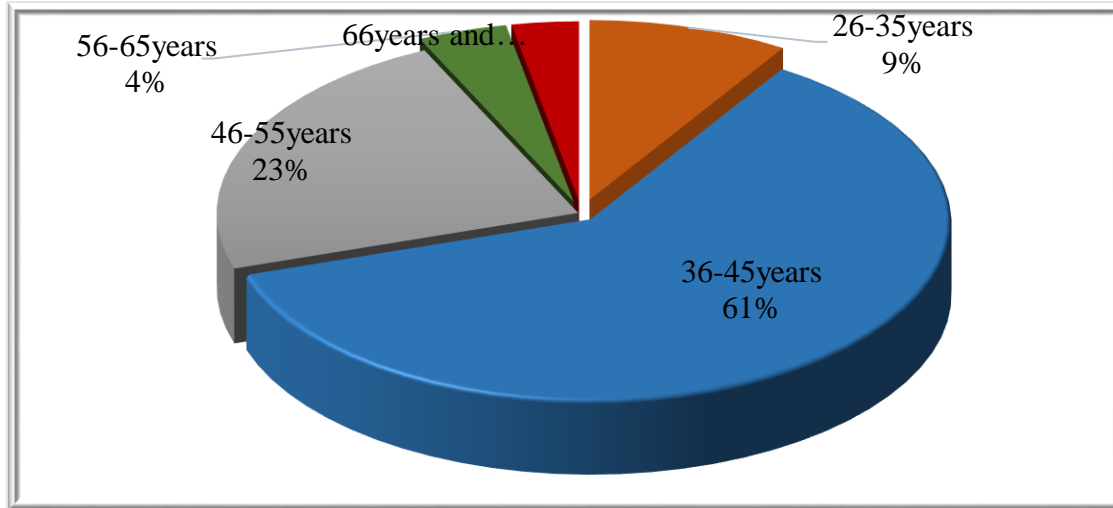


Figure 1: Age Distribution of Respondents

The figure above shows that the majority of respondents (61%) fall within the 36-45 age range, followed by 23% in the 46-55 range, and 9% in the 26-35 range. Only 4% are between 56-65 years old, and 3% are 66 or older.

Table 2: Ethnicity of the Respondents

		f	%
Ethnicity	Yoruba	84	84.0
	Hausa/Fulani	5	5.0
	Igbo	11	11.0

The ethnicity distribution reveals a striking dominance of Yoruba (84%), with minority of Hausa/Fulani and Igbo being 5% and 11%. This suggests a significant ethnic homogeneity in the sample, potentially reflecting regional or cultural factors.

Table 3: Religion of the Respondents

		f	%
Religion	Islam	25	25.0
	Christianity	75	75.0

The religious affiliation of respondents shows a clear majority identifying as Christian (75%), with a significant minority identifying as Muslim (25%).

Table 4: French Proficiency Level

French Proficiency Levels	Frequency	Percentage
Fluent (C1/C2)	12	12%
Intermediate (B1/B2)	23	23%
Basic (A1/A2)	42	42%
No Proficiency	23	23%

From Table 4, 12% of the respondents are C1/C2 level, 23% are B1/B2 level, 42 % are A1/A2 level while 23% are not proficient in French language.

Data on Research Question**Table 5: Impact on Trade & Business**

I experience difficulties negotiating deals in francophone markets	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	68	68 %
No	32	32 %

From Table 5, 68% of Nigerian traders reported difficulties negotiating deals in Francophone markets due to language barriers while only 32 % do not report difficulties.

Table 6: Reliance on Interpreters

I rely on interpreters	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	54	68 %
No	46	32 %

From the above Table 6, 54% of respondents reported relying on interpreters which increased their transaction costs by an estimated 15-30% while 46 % indicated they do not rely on interpreters.

Table 7: Employment Opportunities in Francophone West Africa

Lack of French fluency disqualified me from regional job opportunities	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	76	76 %
No	24	24 %

From the above Table 7, 76% of Nigerian job seekers reported that lack of French fluency disqualified them from regional job opportunities while 24% said it did not.

Table 8: ECOWAS job postings Language requirement

I agree that ECOWAS job postings required bilingual (French-English) proficiency	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	61	61 %
No	39	39 %

From Table 8, 61% of respondents agreed that ECOWAS job postings required bilingual (French-English) proficiency while 39 % did not agree.

Table 9: Exposure to French Language

I did French beyond secondary school	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	18	18 %
No	82	82 %

From Table 9, only 18% of Nigerian graduates had taken French courses beyond secondary school while 82 % did not.

Table 10: Perception of Nigeria's French Language Policy

I agree that current French language education in schools is ineffective	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	82	82 %
No	18	18 %

From Table 10, 82% of the respondents agreed that current French language education in schools is ineffective, while 18 % disagreed.

Table 11: Opinion of respondents on compulsory adoption of French language in tertiary Institutions

I believed Nigeria should adopt compulsory French in tertiary institutions	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	65	65 %
No	35	35 %

From Table 11, 65% of the respondents believed that Nigeria should adopt compulsory French in tertiary institutions, while 35% did not believe.

Table 12: Should government-fund immersion programmes

I support government-funded immersion programmes for professionals	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	57	57 %
No	43	43 %

From Table 12, 57% of the respondents supported government-funded immersion programmes for professionals while 43 % did not.

Discussion of Findings

Language Barriers Hinder Trade and Economic Growth

The data show that only 12% of Nigerians are fluent in French, while 23% have no proficiency at all. This deficiency directly impacts trade, as 68% of Nigerian traders face difficulties in Francophone markets, forcing reliance on costly interpreters. Regression analysis showed a significant negative correlation ($r = -0.72$, $p < 0.05$) between low French proficiency and reduced trade volumes with Francophone ECOWAS countries.

The findings confirm that French proficiency is a critical determinant of Nigeria's economic integration in West Africa. Nigerian traders lose business opportunities due to communication gaps, while formal sector trade remains underdeveloped because of reliance on informal intermediaries. This aligns with Anderson and van Wincoop's (2004) theory that language barriers increase transaction costs in cross-border commerce.

Nigeria's Workforce is Disadvantaged in Regional Labour Markets

The study found that 76% of Nigerian job seekers were excluded from Francophone job markets due to language barriers, while 61% of ECOWAS job postings required bilingualism. This imbalance suggests that Nigeria's workforce is at a competitive disadvantage compared to Francophone professionals, who often secure jobs in Nigeria due to their English proficiency. The data supports Chiswick and Miller's (2005)

argument that language skills directly influence employability. Nigerian professionals face exclusion from high-paying jobs in Francophone countries, while their Francophone counterparts easily integrate into Nigeria's Anglophone labour market. This asymmetry weakens Nigeria's economic influence in ECOWAS.

Policy Failures in French Language Education

Despite Nigeria's National Policy on Education (NPE) mandating French as a second language, 82% of respondents deemed current French education ineffective. Case studies showed that only 30% of Nigerian secondary schools have qualified French teachers, and most universities do not enforce compulsory French courses. In contrast, Francophone countries like Senegal and Benin enforce English as a compulsory second language, giving their citizens an advantage.

The study validates Bamgbose's (2000) critique of Nigeria's inconsistent language policies. While Francophone nations prioritize bilingualism, Nigeria's educational system treats French as a secondary subject. Interviews revealed that lack of qualified teachers, poor curriculum implementation, and low student motivations contribute to low fluency rates.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that French language proficiency plays a pivotal role in Nigeria's ability to fully integrate into the regional economy of West Africa. The findings reveal that linguistic barriers significantly hinder trade, limit employment

opportunities for Nigerian professionals, and weaken the country's diplomatic influence within ECOWAS. Despite Nigeria's economic dominance in the region, its low French fluency levels place it at a disadvantage compared to Francophone neighbours, who often possess bilingual capabilities that facilitate smoother cross-border interactions. The data underscores a clear correlation between language proficiency and economic outcomes, reinforcing the argument that Nigeria must prioritize French language education to enhance its participation in regional trade, labour mobility, and policy-making. Without addressing these linguistic gaps, Nigeria risks remaining on the periphery of West Africa's economic integration, missing out on the full benefits of a unified regional market. Moving forward, this study advocates for urgent policy reforms to bridge the language divide. The Nigerian government must take decisive steps to strengthen French language education by mandating its inclusion in tertiary curricula, investing in teacher training, and establishing immersion programmes for professionals engaged in cross-border trade. Additionally, partnerships with Francophone nations and regional bodies like ECOWAS could facilitate language exchange initiatives and create more opportunities for Nigerians to develop practical French skills. By adopting these measures, Nigeria can position itself as a more active and influential player in West Africa's economic landscape. Ultimately, fostering bilingualism is not merely an educational goal but a strategic economic imperative one that will empower Nigeria to harness the full

potential of regional integration, strengthen diplomatic ties, and secure a more competitive foothold in the Francophone-dominated markets of West Africa.

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