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The Role Of French Language Proficiency In Enhancing Cross-Border Trade Between Nigeria And Francophone Countries

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Abstract
This study explored how proficiency in the French language impacts cross-border trade between Nigeria and Francophone nations. It looked closely at the ways in which being skilled in French enhances business communication, affects trade negotiations and access to markets, identifies obstacles faced due to insufficient French skills, and outlines methods for improving French language abilities among Nigerian traders and entrepreneurs. Utilizing a descriptive survey research design, data was gathered from 250 traders and entrepreneurs involved in cross-border trade with Francophone countries through a structured questionnaire. Experts validated the instrument, and a pilot test confirmed its reliability. The analysis incorporated descriptive statistics, using means and standard deviations for Likert-scale items, along with frequency counts and percentages for multiple-response items. The findings indicated that proficiency in French substantially aids business communication between Nigerian traders and their Francophone counterparts, scoring a Grand Mean of 3.11 with a standard deviation of 0.98. Additionally, French skills positively impacted trade negotiations and market access, with a Grand Mean of 3.21 and a standard deviation of 0.93—this particularly enhanced negotiation effectiveness, fostered stronger business relationships, and opened new market opportunities. In contrast, a lack of proficiency in French was identified as a significant barrier to cross-border trade (Grand Mean = 3.26, SD = 0.94), resulting in communication challenges, misunderstandings during negotiations, restricted market access, and a greater reliance on interpreters. Furthermore, respondents highlighted effective strategies for enhancing French language skills, such as raising awareness of the economic advantages of proficiency (88.0%), conducting regular French language training workshops (86.0%), and promoting online French learning platforms (84.0%). The study concludes that having proficiency in French plays a crucial role in boosting trade outcomes through improved communication, effective negotiations, and enhanced market access between Nigerian traders and their Francophone partners. Therefore, it is important to increase investment in French language education and provide targeted training programs for traders and entrepreneurs to strengthen regional economic integration and foster sustainable trade development...

Keywords French language proficiency, cross-border trade, business communication, market access, trade negotiations, Francophone countries, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria holds a key geographic position in West Africa, sharing borders with several French-speaking nations such as Benin Republic, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, all of which are members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). These neighboring countries are vital trade partners for Nigeria, particularly in sectors involving agricultural produce, petroleum, manufactured goods, and services. Recent data show a steady increase in Nigeria's exports to ECOWAS countries, highlighting the growing importance of regional economic integration and cross-border commerce (NBC,2024;ECOWAS, 2024a). Language plays a crucial role in international trade, as clear communication supports successful negotiations, contract execution, information sharing, customer engagement, and dispute resolution. Given that most of Nigeria's neighbors are Francophone, the ability to speak French has become increasingly valuable for Nigerian traders, entrepreneurs, government personnel, customs agents, and investors engaged in regional trade. As Sabo (2023) notes, French functions as a tool for both economic and political cohesion within ECOWAS, fostering collaboration among member states.

The expansion of initiatives like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme has further emphasized the need for multilingual capabilities in the region. The ECOWAS Trade Information System underscores the value of timely trade data and information exchange in boosting intra-African trade (ECOWAS, 2024b). In this context, language skills are essential for streamlining trade processes and expanding market reach. Proficiency in French helps lower transaction costs linked to translation, miscommunication, and delays. It also builds trust between business partners and allows traders to better understand legal frameworks, customs protocols, and regulatory requirements in French-speaking markets. Otoho et al, (2026) point out that language differences between Nigeria and its Francophone neighbors often hinder effective cooperation and economic engagement.

Moreover, the rising volume of trade between Nigeria and other ECOWAS countries underscores the urgency of improving language skills among Nigerians. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, Nigeria's trade with ECOWAS members grew significantly, with exports exceeding ₦1.5 trillion in 2024 (NBC, 2024). This trend highlights the need for stronger communication abilities to support business interactions with French-speaking counterparts. Despite designating French as a second official language, Nigeria continues to face challenges in teaching and learning the language, including insufficient infrastructure, a lack of trained instructors, and low learner motivation (Onah and Ashabua, 2024). These obstacles have limited the development of the French proficiency needed for meaningful participation in regional trade.

In light of these factors, this study aims to explore how French language competence influences cross-border trade between Nigeria and Francophone countries. It specifically examines how language skills support business communication, market access, trade negotiations, and broader economic integration in West Africa. While regional integration efforts under ECOWAS and AfCFTA have boosted trade, persistent communication barriers—due to limited French proficiency among many Nigerian traders—remain a constraint (ECOWAS, 2024a;2024b). Traders often struggle with contract discussions, regulatory compliance, customer interaction, and building lasting partnerships in Francophone markets. Although French is officially recognized in Nigeria, actual proficiency levels remain low due to shortcomings in education and institutional backing. As a result, many Nigerian businesspeople depend on interpreters and middlemen, which can raise costs and lead to miscommunication.

While past research has mainly addressed the diplomatic role of French in ECOWAS, little attention has been given to its impact on trade and economic collaboration. This study aims to address that gap. **The general objective of this study is to** examine the role of French language proficiency in enhancing cross-border trade between Nigeria and Francophone countries. **The specific objectives therefore to ; a).** determine the extent to which French language proficiency facilitates business communication between Nigerian traders and their counterparts in Francophone countries; b). examine perceived influence of French language proficiency on trade negotiations and market access; c). investigate perceived challenges associated with inadequate French language proficiency in cross-border trade; d). identify strategies for improving French language competence among Nigerian traders and entrepreneurs.This study holds importance as it offers empirical insights into how proficiency in the French language supports regional economic integration and boosts trade. Its findings are valuable for policymakers, educational institutions, language specialists, and business groups, highlighting the need to strengthen French language instruction in Nigeria. Additionally, the research adds to current knowledge on language and international commerce, offering practical suggestions to improve communication and collaboration between Nigeria and neighboring Francophone nations. It also aligns with the goals of ECOWAS and AfCFTA by supporting efforts to enhance trade within Africa and foster broader economic development.

METHODOLOGY

The research was carried out in selected Nigerian border states that have active trade relations with Francophone neighboring countries, specifically Lagos, Ogun, and Cross River States. These states conduct regular commercial exchanges with Benin Republic, Togo, and Cameroon. The study used a purposive sampling method to select 250 Nigerian traders and entrepreneurs who are actively involved in cross-border trade with Francophone African countries. This approach was chosen because the research focused on individuals with specific expertise and firsthand experience in trading with nations such as Benin, Niger, Cameroon, Chad, Togo, Côte d'Ivoire, and Senegal. Given that only a subset of Nigerian traders engage in such international activities, using a probability-based sampling method across the broader trader population would have risked including participants lacking the necessary background to meaningfully contribute to the study's aims. A sample of 250 respondents was deemed sufficient from a statistical standpoint. This is in line with (Cohen, 1992) who has shown that samples larger than 200 generally offer adequate statistical power (at least 0.80) to detect moderate effects in social science research at a significance level of 5%. Similarly, Krejcie and Morgan, (1970) found that for large populations, a sample size between 248 and 384 allows for reliable results with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. Therefore, 250 participants provided a solid foundation for generating dependable descriptive data and strengthening the overall credibility of the findings. To enhance the sample's representativeness, participants were drawn from key commercial hubs in Nigeria with strong trade links to neighboring Francophone countries. These included individuals working in border markets, import-export firms, wholesale distribution, logistics, freight services, and formal trade associations engaged in regional trade. While purposive sampling limits the ability to generalize results to all Nigerian traders, the selected respondents were regarded as knowledgeable cases whose experiences closely mirror the actual conditions of cross-border commerce with Francophone West and Central Africa. Participants were identified through official records from recognized trade associations, border market unions, chambers of commerce, exporters' and importers' networks, and local business directories. Initial access was facilitated by association leaders and market officials, who helped connect the researcher with eligible individuals. To qualify, participants had to have been actively involved in cross-border trade with at least one Francophone country within the past two years and be willing to take part voluntarily. Data collection took place at marketplaces, workplaces, and association gatherings, where the researcher and trained assistants explained the study, obtained informed consent, and administered questionnaires in person. This direct engagement ensured that responses came from individuals with relevant, current experience, thereby supporting the accuracy and trustworthiness of the study outcomes. Data were collected through a self-constructed questionnaire titled "French Language Proficiency and Cross-Border Trade Questionnaire (FLPCTQ)." The instrument gathered information on aspects such as business communication, negotiation processes, market access, difficulties arising from limited French proficiency, and potential ways to improve language competence. The questionnaire underwent face and content validation by three experts—two in French Language Education and one in Measurement and Evaluation—whose feedback was used to refine the tool. To assess reliability, a pilot test was conducted with 30 traders not included in the main study. The data from the pilot were analyzed using Cronbach's Alpha, which produced a coefficient of 0.84, confirming the instrument's reliability for the research.Data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequency counts, percentages, mean scores, and standard deviations, using a 4-point Likert type scale.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

French language proficiency facilitates business communication between Nigerian traders and their counterparts in Francophone countries.

Table 1 revealed that proficiency in the French language plays a crucial role in improving business communication between Nigerian traders and their partners in Francophone nations, boasting a Grand Mean of 3.11 and a standard deviation of 0.98. Respondents leaned strongly towards the view that being proficient in French aids in effective negotiations (Mean = 3.16) and boosts confidence during cross-border discussions (Mean = 3.16). The relatively low standard deviations, ranging from 0.95 to 1.01, reflect a consensus among respondents. Thus, French language skills are vital in strengthening business communication and trade relationships between Nigeria and Francophone countries. To support the above findings,[9], said that French language skills play a crucial role in enhancing business communication for Nigerian traders engaging with partners in Francophone countries, including Benin, Niger, Togo, Cameroon, Senegal, and Côte d'Ivoire. Since French is the official language in these nations, Nigerian traders who are proficient in it are better equipped to negotiate contracts, clarify product specifications, comprehend market regulations, and establish solid business connections. Clear communication minimizes misunderstandings, builds trust, and fosters smoother transactions across borders (Adegbija and Osuji, 2022). Additionally, being fluent in French allows traders to tap into essential business information, such as trade policies, customs procedures, market opportunities, and legal documents, which are predominantly available in French. This language proficiency enhances their competitive edge and boosts their capacity to engage effectively in regional economic integration efforts, like those of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) (Omoniyi, 2021). Moreover, knowing French promotes cultural understanding, a vital component for thriving in international business and forming lasting partnerships (Bamgbose, 2020). In summary, mastering the French language is a strategic advantage for Nigerian traders looking to expand their reach in Francophone markets, streamline their communication, and elevate their cross-border trade success.

Table 1: How French language proficiency facilitates business communication

S/N	Item Statement	Mean	SD
1	French language proficiency enables effective negotiation with business partners in Francophone countries.	3.16	0.95
2	Knowledge of French reduces communication barriers during business transactions.	3.12	0.97
3	French proficiency improves understanding of trade agreements and contracts.	3.06	0.96
4	Traders who speak French establish stronger business relationships with Francophone counterparts.	3.07	0.99
5	French language skills enhance customer service and business interactions in Francophone markets.	3.11	1.01
6	French proficiency increases confidence during cross-border business communication.	3.16	0.99
	(High Extent = 2.50 and above)		

Influence of French Language Proficiency on Trade Negotiations and Market Access among Nigerian Traders

Table 2 highlights the significant role of French language skills in trade negotiations and market access for Nigerian traders engaging with partners in Francophone countries. With an average score of 3.21 and a standard deviation of 0.93, these findings emphasize how essential French proficiency can be. The statement that received the highest score was "French proficiency facilitates access to new markets in Francophone countries," which scored an average of 3.23 (SD = 0.98). This was closely followed by points emphasizing the importance of reducing misunderstandings during negotiations and enabling direct communication with suppliers and distributors, both averaging 3.22. The lower standard deviations indicate a strong consensus among responses. Overall, these results according to (Omonyi, 2021), suggests that being proficient in French can be a valuable strategic asset for enhancing negotiation results, broadening market opportunities, and strengthening trade relations throughout West and Central Africa. French language proficiency plays a crucial role in enhancing trade negotiations and market access among Nigerian traders operating within Francophone West and Central African countries. As French is the official language of many of Nigeria's neighboring countries, including Benin, Niger, Togo, Cameroon, Senegal, and Côte d'Ivoire, the ability to communicate effectively in French provides traders with a significant competitive advantage (Omoniyi, 2021).

In trade negotiations, proficiency in French enables Nigerian traders to communicate directly with business partners, discuss pricing, negotiate contract terms, and resolve disputes without relying heavily on interpreters. Direct communication reduces the risk of misunderstandings and fosters trust, which is essential for successful business transactions (Adegbija and Osuji, 2022). Traders who are proficient in French are also better positioned to understand cultural nuances and business etiquette in Francophone markets, thereby strengthening commercial relationships. Furthermore, French language skills improve market access by enabling traders to obtain and interpret important business information, such as import and export regulations, customs requirements, market trends, and legal documentation. Access to such information facilitates informed decision-making and enhances the ability of traders to identify and exploit emerging business opportunities across Francophone countries (Bamgbose, 2020). Consequently, French language proficiency contributes to increased trade efficiency, broader market penetration, and improved economic outcomes for Nigerian traders engaged in cross-border commerce.

Table 2: Influence of French Language Proficiency on Trade Negotiations and Market Access among Nigerian Traders

S/N	Item Statement	Mean	SD
1	French language proficiency improves traders' ability to negotiate favorable business terms.	3.21	0.94
2	Proficiency in French facilitates access to new markets in Francophone countries.	3.23	0.98
3	French-speaking traders are more successful in establishing trade partnerships.	3.18	0.91
4	French proficiency enhances understanding of market regulations and trade policies.	3.16	0.89
5	Knowledge of French reduces misunderstandings during trade negotiations.	3.22	0.96
6	French language skills increase traders' confidence in international business discussions.	3.20	0.92
7	French proficiency facilitates direct communication with suppliers and distributors in Francophone markets.	3.22	0.97
8	The ability to communicate in French improves competitiveness in regional trade.	3.22	0.90

Mean; 2.50 and above= High proficiency

Challenges Associated with Inadequate French Language Proficiency in Cross-Border Trade

Table 3 showed that limited proficiency in French poses a major obstacle to efficient cross-border trade between Nigerian traders and those in French-speaking countries. With a grand mean of 3.26 and a standard deviation of 0.94, there is clear consensus among respondents that weak French language skills hinder trading activities. The most frequently cited challenges are difficulties in communication during transactions (Mean = 3.28), reliance on interpreters (Mean = 3.28), and lost business opportunities (Mean = 3.28). The narrow standard deviations reflect a strong agreement across responses. The above agrees with [12], whoopined that inadequate French language abilities can restrict market entry, undermine negotiation effectiveness, raise transaction costs, and constrain expansion prospects in Francophone markets. Inadequate proficiency in the French language presents considerable obstacles for Nigerian traders involved in cross-border commerce with Francophone nations in West and Central Africa. A significant issue is the lack of effective communication during business discussions. Traders who are not fluent in French frequently encounter challenges when negotiating prices, discussing product details, specifying contract terms, and addressing payment conditions. This often results in misunderstandings, delays, and even failed transactions (Ajewole, 2025). Furthermore, language barriers can erode trust among trading partners, complicating the establishment and maintenance of long-lasting business relationships.

Another obstacle is the restricted access to market information and understanding of regulatory frameworks. A substantial number of trade documents, customs regulations, import-export guidelines, and commercial policies in Francophone countries are primarily published in French. Traders with limited language abilities may find it difficult to comprehend these documents, raising the risk of non-compliance, financial losses, and delays at border checkpoints (Oriakponu, 2024). Moreover, these language barriers hinder traders' capability to recognize emerging market opportunities and to engage effectively in regional trade networks. Lack of French proficiency also escalates transaction costs, as traders frequently rely on interpreters, brokers, or intermediaries for communication support. This dependency can lead to increased operational expenditures and open the door to misinformation or exploitation. Research on cross-border trade indicates that language barriers diminish the effectiveness of international business interactions and restrict opportunities for market expansion (Ma et al.2024; Zhang et al., 2024). As a result, insufficient French language skills undermine trade competitiveness, limit market access, and hinder the advantages of regional economic integration within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) framework (Ajewole, 2025).

Table3: Perceived Challenges Associated with Inadequate French Language Proficiency in Cross-Border Trade

S/N	Challenge Statement	Mean	SD
1	Inadequate French proficiency leads to communication barriers during trade transactions.	3.28	0.96
2	Poor knowledge of French causes misunderstandings in trade negotiations.	3.27	0.91
3	Limited French language skills hinder access to Francophone markets.	3.24	0.95
	Traders with inadequate French proficiency experience difficulties understanding trade regulations and documentation.	3.24	0.90
5	Lack of French proficiency increases dependence on interpreters and intermediaries.	3.28	0.98
6	Inadequate French language skills reduce traders' confidence during cross-border negotiations.	3.22	0.91
7	Poor French proficiency limits the ability to establish strong business relationships with Francophone partners.	3.25	0.95
8	Inadequate French proficiency results in missed business and investment opportunities.	3.28	0.95

(4-point Likert; Accepted mean=2.50 and above)

Strategies for Improving French Language Competence among Nigerian Traders and Entrepreneurs

Table 4 revealed that respondents have highlighted several effective strategies for improving French language skills among Nigerian traders and entrepreneurs. The most commonly suggested approach is raising awareness about the economic advantages of being proficient in French for regional trade, with 220 respondents (88.0%) recognizing its importance. Close behind are recommendations for organizing regular French language training workshops, supported by 215 respondents (86.0%), and promoting the use of online platforms and mobile apps for French language learning, noted by 210 respondents (84.0%). Other significant strategies include integrating French language courses into entrepreneurship programs (82.0%) and offering government-sponsored scholarships and incentives (79.2%). These results indicate that combining formal training, policy backing, technological resources, and real-life exposure to Francophone environments could greatly boost French language proficiency among Nigerian traders and entrepreneurs, enhancing their competitiveness in both regional and international markets. The above findings are n line with (Akinpelu and Yegblemenawob, 2025), who said that enhancing French language skills among Nigerian traders and entrepreneurs is crucial for boosting cross-border commerce, broadening market reach, and advancing economic integration within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Since several of Nigeria's neighboring countries are French-speaking, focused language initiatives can greatly improve business communication, negotiation outcomes, and overall competitiveness (Ajewole, 2025). A particularly effective approach involves offering specialized French-for-Business courses designed with the practical needs of traders in mind. These programs should emphasize real-world language use, covering areas such as client interaction, marketing, contract understanding, trade discussions, and handling cross-border paperwork. Evidence suggests that language training yields the best results when it aligns closely with professional demands and authentic communication scenarios (Akinpelu and Yegblemenawob, 2025).

To support working professionals, government bodies, chambers of commerce, and business groups should work alongside educational institutions to deliver accessible adult learning options. Flexible formats—such as evening sessions, weekend workshops, and brief certification courses—allow entrepreneurs to build functional French proficiency without interfering with their daily operations. Ongoing learning supports better retention and increases the likelihood of applying language skills in actual business settings (Ashiru-Abdulrahman, 2024). The integration of digital tools like mobile apps, online classrooms, and AI-powered language platforms can further expand access to instruction. E-learning offers convenience and enables traders in rural or underserved regions to develop their skills at a personalized pace. Research confirms that technology-enhanced methods effectively strengthen speaking, listening, reading, and writing abilities in adult learners (Akinpelu and Yegblemenewob, 2025).

Immersion remains one of the most powerful ways to build practical language competence. Trade organizations and public agencies can support exchange programs, business internships, and commercial delegations to Francophone nations including Benin, Niger, Togo, and Côte d'Ivoire. Direct engagement with native speakers helps traders pick up relevant vocabulary, cultural insights, and negotiation techniques essential for successful trade (Okongor and Okolie, 2025). Public policy also has a key role to play in encouraging French language uptake. Governments can fund training initiatives, offer study grants, and set up language resource centers in major trading cities. Such measures would promote broader participation while advancing Nigeria's regional cooperation goals. Collaboration among business associations, labor unions, universities, and language institutes can lead to the creation of sector-specific French curricula. These partnerships help ensure that instruction addresses common communication challenges in areas like logistics, customs procedures, and commercial bargaining (Oriakpono, 2024). Companies should foster an environment where multilingual ability is seen as a strategic advantage. Research shows that language skills contribute to stronger international performance, smoother cross-border dealings, and greater market access. Firms that invest in language development often benefit from improved global partnerships and expanded business prospects (Zhang et al., 2024).

Table 4: Strategies for Improving French Language Competence among Nigerian Traders and Entrepreneurs

S/N	Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
1	Organizing regular French language training workshops for traders	215	86.0
2	Integrating French language courses into entrepreneurship and business development programmes	205	82.0
3	Providing government-sponsored French language scholarships and incentives	198	79.2
4	Encouraging participation in French immersion programmes in Francophone countries	190	76.0
5	Establishing language resource centres for traders and entrepreneurs	185	74.0
6	Promoting the use of online French language learning platforms and mobile applications	210	84.0
7	Facilitating business exchange programmes with Francophone countries	175	70.0
8	Encouraging traders to join French-speaking business associations and networks	170	68.0
9	Providing workplace-based French language coaching and mentoring	182	72.8
10	Increasing awareness of the economic benefits of French language proficiency in regional trade	220	88.0

Conclusion

This study highlights the crucial impact of French language proficiency on boosting cross-border trade between Nigeria and Francophone countries. Our findings indicate that being proficient in French not only enhances communication but also empowers traders to negotiate better and gain better access to markets across Francophone Africa. Those with strong French skills tend to build more robust business relationships, comprehend trade regulations and contracts more effectively, and conduct transactions with increased confidence and efficiency. However, the research also revealed that a lack of French language skills significantly hinders cross-border trade. Traders struggling with the language face various challenges such as communication barriers, misunderstandings during negotiations, restricted market access, and reliance on interpreters. These issues impede effective business interactions and may result in missed commercial opportunities. Furthermore, the study shows that improving French language skills among Nigerian traders and entrepreneurs is achievable through focused efforts, including regular language training workshops, online learning options, immersive programs, government support initiatives, and heightened awareness of the economic benefits that come with French proficiency. Consequently, we conclude that French language proficiency is not just a valuable skill but also a vital economic asset that plays a significant role in regional trade integration, enhancing business competitiveness, and supporting sustainable economic development. This study recommends that the Federal Government, through the Federal Ministry of Industry, Trade and Investment, integrate French language training into trade development and entrepreneurship programs to equip traders with essential communication skills for cross-border business. Establishing French language resource centres at key border posts and commercial hubs will provide the necessary training, translation services, and trade information. Additionally, introducing incentives like subsidized French training and support for obtaining recognized certifications will benefit traders. Regular workshops and language immersion programs tailored for cross-border traders should be organized, and incorporating French language skills into export-readiness initiatives can further enhance traders' negotiation abilities and access to Francophone markets, ultimately boosting regional trade and Nigeria's economic ties with neighboring countries.

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