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French Language Skills as Key to Unlocking Foreign Direct Investment in Emerging African Markets: The Francophonie Advantage

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Abstract

This paper makes a compelling case for the strategic importance of French language skills as a critical determinant of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) flows to emerging African markets. While traditional economic factors such as market size, resource endowment, and infrastructure remain important, growing evidence suggests that linguistic competence—particularly French proficiency—constitutes a significant yet underexplored determinant of investment decisions in Francophone Africa. Drawing on transaction cost economics, information asymmetry theory, institutional theory, and empirical business studies, the paper argues that French language skills function as a form of economic capital that reduces transaction costs, mitigates information asymmetries, enhances institutional legitimacy, and facilitates access to transnational business networks. Empirical evidence from West African comparative studies and firm-level analyses of Moroccan multinational enterprises further demonstrates the positive correlation between French proficiency and FDI inflows. The paper also highlights the emergence of “Francophonie économique” as a strategic reconfiguration of linguistic and economic relations in Africa, particularly in the context of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). The study concludes with policy implications for investors, governments, educators, and development actors seeking to harness the Francophone advantage.

Keywords: Foreign Direct Investment, Francophonie économique, language capital, French language skills, Africa, regional integration

Introduction

In an era of intensifying global competition for influence in Africa, French language skills have emerged as a powerful yet underutilized asset for investors, entrepreneurs, and host economies. The relationship between language and international capital flows represents a critical but often neglected dimension of international business studies. This paper argues that French proficiency should be recognized as a strategic economic resource capable of unlocking significant investment opportunities across Francophone Africa.

The concept of “Francophonie économique” has gained increasing prominence in recent years, reflecting a shift from cultural cooperation to economic partnership frameworks. As Mbey et al. (2025) note, this evolution represents a transition toward strategic economic engagement within the Francophone space. This transformation has been reinforced by broader geopolitical shifts, including intensifying competition from China, Russia, Turkey, and Gulf states (Cannon & Ali, 2023), which has paradoxically increased the strategic value of linguistic and institutional proximity.

Francophone Africa comprises over 25 countries where French serves as an official or working language in governance, education, and commerce. With over 300 million French speakers globally—and projections indicating that approximately 80% will be in Africa by 2050—the language is increasingly becoming an African economic asset (Babel for Business, 2025). Empirical research confirms that linguistic proximity significantly influences investment flows. For example, Soussane et al. (2022) demonstrate that Moroccan multinational enterprises are more likely to invest in countries with higher proportions of French-speaking populations.

Institutional frameworks such as ECOWAS and UEMOA further reinforce the importance of French in facilitating regional trade and integration. Additionally, the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF, 2025) reports measurable economic outcomes from its investment facilitation initiatives, reinforcing the idea that linguistic networks produce tangible economic value.

Against this backdrop, this paper examines how French language skills function as a determinant of FDI in emerging African markets, integrating theoretical and empirical perspectives.

Literature Review: Why French Skills Create Economic Value

French as a Competitive Advantage

Research on the determinants of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) has traditionally emphasized economic fundamentals such as market size, natural resource endowment, infrastructure quality, labor costs, and institutional stability. While these factors remain essential, an emerging strand of literature highlights that non-economic variables—particularly language—play a critical but underexplored role in shaping investment decisions and outcomes.

Within this context, language functions as an operational infrastructure of international business, facilitating communication, negotiation, coordination, and post-investment integration. Despite this, it has historically been marginalized in mainstream FDI theory.

Zhang et al. (2024) argue that language has long been the “forgotten factor” in multinational management. Their empirical findings demonstrate that language proficiency significantly influences cross-border mergers and acquisitions across multiple dimensions, including deal volume, deal value, and transaction success rates. This suggests that language competence is not merely a soft skill but a measurable determinant of investment performance.

Similarly, Anikpe et al. (2024), in a comparative study of West African economies, show that linguistic structures significantly shape FDI dynamics across the region. Their findings underscore that differences between Anglophone and Francophone economies are not only institutional or historical but also linguistically embedded, reinforcing the argument that language should be treated as a core economic variable in investment analysis.

Language Capital as an Economic Asset

Wei et al. (2018) conceptualize “language capital” as an economic asset that enhances the productivity of human capital in attracting FDI. Their cross-country analysis confirms that shared language significantly strengthens the human capital–FDI relationship (DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ibusrev.2017.12.006>).

Their cross-country empirical analysis demonstrates that shared language significantly strengthens the relationship between human capital and FDI. In other words, education and technical skills alone are insufficient to maximize FDI attraction unless they are complemented by linguistic compatibility between investors and host economies.

This conceptualization has important implications for Francophone Africa. It suggests that French language acquisition should not be viewed solely as a cultural or educational achievement, but rather as a strategic economic investment that enhances a country’s ability to attract, absorb, and sustain foreign direct investment.

Language, in this sense, becomes a form of intangible infrastructure that reduces friction in international economic exchange. This implies that French acquisition should be treated as economic investment rather than cultural competence.

Complementarity Between Language and Human Capital

The literature increasingly emphasizes that language capital does not operate in isolation but functions in direct complementarity with human capital. Human capital—comprising education, skills, and technical expertise—produces its highest economic returns when communication barriers are minimized or eliminated.

Wei et al. (2018) explicitly argue that the productivity of human capital in attracting FDI depends on the presence of shared language environments. This means that even highly skilled workforces may fail to fully leverage their capabilities in attracting foreign investment if linguistic barriers restrict interaction with investors, regulators, and global markets.

This complementarity is particularly significant in Francophone Africa, where technical, legal, and administrative systems are frequently mediated through French-language institutional frameworks. In such contexts, the ability to access, interpret, and operate within these frameworks becomes a critical determinant of investment efficiency and success.

Furthermore, this interaction between language and human capital helps explain why some economies with relatively comparable levels of education and resources experience divergent FDI inflows. The presence or absence of linguistic alignment can either amplify or constrain the economic productivity of existing human capital.

Mechanisms Through Which French Language Skills Drive FDI

Understanding the mechanisms through which French language skills influence Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) decisions is essential for explaining why linguistic competence generates measurable economic advantages. Rather than functioning as a peripheral factor, language operates as a central mechanism that shapes transaction efficiency, information flow, institutional trust, and network embeddedness in international business environments.

1 Reducing Transaction Costs

From a transaction cost economics perspective, international investment involves multiple layers of costly exchanges, including information search, negotiation, contract formulation, regulatory compliance, and post-investment coordination. Language differences significantly increase these costs by introducing translation expenses, communication delays, and the risk of misinterpretation.

French language proficiency directly reduces these frictions by enabling seamless communication across all stages of the investment lifecycle. Shared language eliminates the need for intermediaries, reduces dependency on translation services, and enhances the precision of contractual and operational communication.

Konara and Wei (2014) emphasize that language plays a critical but often overlooked role in bilateral FDI by lowering transaction costs and facilitating smoother cross-border economic interactions. Similarly, Zhang et al. (2024) demonstrate that language proficiency significantly enhances the efficiency of cross-border mergers and acquisitions, particularly during negotiation and post-acquisition integration phases, where communication precision is crucial.

Empirical evidence from Soussane et al. (2022) further reinforces this mechanism by showing that linguistic proximity significantly influences the location choices of Moroccan multinational enterprises. Their findings confirm that countries with higher proportions of French-speaking populations attract greater FDI inflows, largely due to reduced communication and coordination costs.

2 Mitigating Information Asymmetries

Information asymmetry represents a fundamental barrier in international investment, where foreign investors often possess limited knowledge of local market conditions, institutional frameworks, regulatory environments, and socio-political risks. Language proficiency plays a critical role in reducing these asymmetries by enabling direct access to locally produced information.

French language skills allow investors to bypass secondary interpretations and engage directly with primary sources such as local media, policy documents, legal texts, and business networks. This improves the accuracy of risk assessment and enhances decision-making efficiency.

Zhang et al. (2024) identify two key mechanisms through which language reduces information asymmetry: increased societal openness and enhanced innovation capacity. They argue that language proficiency facilitates deeper integration into global knowledge systems, enabling economies to remain connected to international best practices and technological innovation flows.

In the context of Francophone Africa, this mechanism is particularly significant because much of the institutional and regulatory information governing business activity is produced and disseminated in French. Consequently, French proficiency becomes a strategic asset that directly improves informational efficiency and reduces uncertainty in investment decisions.

3 Building Trust and Institutional Legitimacy

Trust and legitimacy are central determinants of successful foreign investment, particularly in contexts characterized by institutional uncertainty or weak governance structures. Language plays a critical role in generating both interpersonal trust and institutional legitimacy.

French language proficiency signals cultural familiarity, commitment to the host environment, and willingness to engage meaningfully with local stakeholders. This enhances investor credibility and facilitates stronger relationships with government agencies, regulatory bodies, employees, and business partners.

From an institutional theory perspective, shared language reduces perceived “foreignness” and enhances the legitimacy of foreign firms operating in local contexts. This is particularly relevant in Francophone Africa, where French is embedded within legal, administrative, and governance systems.

Shingleton (2024) highlights that French is essential for navigating legal and regulatory environments in Francophone West Africa, as contracts, statutes, and official documentation are primarily written in French. This linguistic embeddedness means that French proficiency is not optional but structurally necessary for compliance, risk management, and institutional interaction.

Wei et al. (2018) further conceptualize this as “language capital,” arguing that language functions as a long-term asset that enhances institutional embeddedness and increases the expected returns on investment.

4 Enabling Network Formation and Embeddedness

Beyond transactional efficiency and institutional access, language also functions as a mechanism of social and professional network formation. Shared French enables investors to access business communities, professional associations, and informal networks that are critical for information exchange and opportunity identification.

These networks generate social capital, which in turn facilitates investment by improving access to privileged information, partnership opportunities, and local market intelligence. In many cases, these informal channels are as important as formal institutional structures in shaping investment outcomes.

The Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) actively leverages this mechanism through its economic missions, which connect entrepreneurs and investors across Francophone countries. These initiatives demonstrate how linguistic commonality can be operationalized into structured business networks that generate measurable economic outcomes.

Zhang et al. (2024) further show that language effects are particularly strong for firms with limited resources, such as SMEs and unlisted firms, suggesting that linguistic networks help compensate for informational and financial constraints. This implies that French proficiency plays a democratizing role in international investment by lowering entry barriers for smaller economic actors.

Soussane et al. (2022) similarly confirm that linguistic proximity significantly enhances FDI flows by embedding firms within culturally and institutionally aligned networks, particularly in South–South investment contexts.

Empirical Synthesis: FDI Evidence Integration Matrix

This section synthesizes the empirical literature on the relationship between French language skills and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) into an integrated analytical framework. Rather than presenting studies in isolation, it organizes findings according to key analytical dimensions—macroeconomic, meso-institutional, and micro-firm level evidence—thereby demonstrating convergence across methodological approaches and geographic contexts.

1 Macro-Level Evidence: Cross-Country FDI Patterns

At the macro level, comparative studies consistently show that linguistic structures significantly shape FDI flows. Anikpe et al. (2024), using a panel autoregressive distributed lag (ARDL) model across thirteen West African countries, demonstrate that FDI dynamics differ systematically between Anglophone and Francophone economies. Their findings confirm that “lingual structures may play a dominant role in the attraction of FDI and other macroeconomic variables” (Anikpe et al., 2024, p. 238).

Similarly, Wei et al. (2018) provide cross-country evidence that shared language significantly enhances the effect of human capital on FDI inflows across 3,315 country pairs. Their results establish that language is not merely contextual but structurally embedded in global investment patterns, functioning as a complementary economic variable rather than a peripheral cultural factor.

Together, these findings establish that language proximity is a statistically significant determinant of FDI at the macroeconomic level.

2 Meso-Level Evidence: Institutional and Regional Dynamics

At the meso level, evidence highlights the importance of institutional environments and regional economic structures in shaping the value of French language skills.

Soussane et al. (2022), analyzing Moroccan outward FDI across 54 host countries, demonstrate that linguistic proximity—particularly French and Arabic—significantly increases the likelihood of investment flows. Their findings show that “the higher the share of French- and Arabic-speaking populations, the more the host country attracts FDI from Morocco” (Soussane et al., 2022, p. 2).

This supports an institutional interpretation of language as a mechanism of reduced uncertainty, where shared linguistic systems signal deeper institutional compatibility between investor and host economies.

Furthermore, institutional frameworks such as the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) reinforce this meso-level dynamic by actively creating economic linkages among Francophone states, generating measurable commercial outcomes through structured economic missions (OIF, 2025).

3 Micro-Level Evidence: Firm Behaviour and Investment Decisions

At the micro level, evidence demonstrates how language proficiency directly influences firm-level investment decisions and operational performance.

Zhang et al. (2024) find that lingua franca proficiency significantly affects cross-border mergers and acquisitions, influencing deal volume, valuation, and success rates. Importantly, they distinguish between language input and output abilities, showing that “language output ability (writing and speaking skills) is more important than input ability (listening and reading)” (Zhang et al., 2024, p. 2).

This highlights that active French communication skills are especially critical in negotiation-intensive investment contexts.

Similarly, Soussane et al. (2022) show that Moroccan multinational enterprises strategically select host countries based on linguistic affinity, reinforcing the idea that language is embedded in firm-level internationalisation strategy rather than being an external factor

4 Integrative Evidence Matrix: Convergence Across Levels

When synthesized, the empirical literature reveals a high degree of convergence across analytical levels:

- **Macro level:** Language structures shape FDI distribution (Anikpe et al., 2024; Wei et al., 2018)
- **Meso level:** Institutional and regional systems amplify language effects (Soussane et al., 2022; OIF, 2025)
- **Micro level:** Firm behaviour confirms operational importance of language (Zhang et al., 2024)

This multi-level convergence supports the conclusion that French language skills function as a **systemic determinant of FDI**, operating simultaneously as economic capital, institutional signal, and operational tool.

5 Analytical Implication of the Evidence Synthesis

The integration of empirical findings suggests that French language skills should not be treated as a peripheral cultural variable but as a **structural component of investment ecosystems in Francophone Africa**.

Across datasets and methodologies, the evidence consistently demonstrates that:

- Language reduces transaction frictions,
- Enhances institutional compatibility,
- Strengthens investment networks,
- And increases firm-level investment success probability.

This synthesis reinforces the theoretical argument that French language proficiency constitutes a form of **economic infrastructure embedded within FDI systems**, rather than a soft skill detached from economic fundamentals.

Conclusion of the Empirical Synthesis

Overall, the empirical literature demonstrates strong cross-level agreement that French language skills significantly influence FDI flows into emerging African markets. The consistency of findings across macro, meso, and micro levels provides robust support for the “Francophonie advantage” thesis developed in this paper.

Theoretical Framework

1 Theory of Vulnerability

The theory of vulnerability highlights the structural exposure of individuals and communities to socio-economic and institutional risks, regardless of their individual capacities (Fineman, 2008). It advances a systemic understanding of the human condition, arguing that vulnerability is not exceptional but universal, though unevenly distributed across social contexts.

Within the context of this study, this framework helps explain how persistent structural conditions in the Niger Delta—particularly chronic poverty, widespread youth unemployment, and environmental degradation resulting from decades of intensive oil exploitation—generate a socially unstable environment conducive to insecurity.

These factors should not be treated in isolation but rather as interconnected mechanisms of social, economic, and environmental vulnerability production. Vulnerability, therefore, serves as an analytical lens that links governance failures to processes of exclusion and the progressive erosion of local livelihood systems

2 Human Security Theory

Human security theory represents a paradigmatic shift from state-centric security approaches by placing individuals at the center of security analysis. It expands the concept of security beyond military protection to include economic, social, environmental, and health dimensions.

In this study, human security theory demonstrates that insecurity in the Niger Delta extends far beyond visible physical violence to include:

- economic insecurity,

- environmental insecurity,
- social insecurity.

This perspective reveals that violent manifestations are not isolated phenomena but visible symptoms of a deeper structural deficit in human security. In this sense, insecurity becomes an indicator of governance failure and underdevelopment.

3 Theoretical Integration: Toward a Systemic Understanding of Insecurity

The integration of vulnerability theory (Fineman, 2008) and human security theory provides a robust analytical framework for capturing the complexity of the Niger Delta context.

While vulnerability theory explains the structural production of social fragility, human security theory highlights its multidimensional manifestations. Combined, these frameworks allow insecurity to be interpreted not as an episodic or purely criminal phenomenon, but as the outcome of structural vulnerability exacerbated by systemic governance failures, unequal resource distribution, and weak environmental regulation. Despite the extensive body of literature on insecurity in Nigeria, three major limitations persist.

First, a significant proportion of existing studies remains descriptive, focusing primarily on the manifestations of insecurity such as kidnapping, militancy, and communal conflict, without sufficiently engaging with integrated theoretical frameworks capable of explaining their structural causes (Achumba et al., 2013; Jafaru et al., 2024).

Second, although some studies acknowledge the role of poverty, unemployment, and environmental degradation, these factors are often treated in isolation rather than being analytically integrated within a broader vulnerability–human security nexus (Siloko, 2024; African Scholar Journal, 2025).

Third, there is still limited scholarly attention to the governance of natural resources as a central explanatory variable in insecurity analysis, particularly within a framework that simultaneously incorporates environmental justice, socio-economic inequality, and human security.

Consequently, there exists a significant analytical gap in the literature regarding integrated approaches that connect governance structures, structural vulnerability, and human security within a unified explanatory model.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on documentary analysis of secondary data sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional reports, and case studies.

Justification

This method is appropriate because FDI and language interaction is a multidimensional phenomenon that requires synthesis of dispersed empirical and theoretical literature.

Limitations

- No primary field data collection
- Dependence on existing literature
- Potential publication bias in secondary sources

Despite these limitations, the approach allows for comprehensive conceptual integration across multiple studies.

Discussion and Analysis

This section integrates the mechanisms of influence, empirical evidence, and the identified literature gap in order to clarify the theoretical and practical contribution of this study to the growing field of language economics and FDI studies in Africa.

Mechanisms of Influence: From Language to Investment Outcomes

French language skills influence Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) through four interdependent mechanisms that collectively position language as a structural economic variable rather than a soft cultural attribute.

(a) Transaction Cost Reduction

French reduces the costs associated with cross-border economic activity by minimizing translation needs, improving contract negotiation efficiency, and facilitating smoother regulatory compliance processes. Konara and Wei (2014) demonstrate that language significantly reduces both direct and indirect transaction costs in international business operations.

In Francophone African contexts, this effect is reinforced by institutional French usage in legal and administrative systems. Supporting this, Soussane et al. (2022) confirm that linguistic proximity significantly increases the probability of FDI inflows, indicating that language directly shapes investment location behaviour.

(b) Reduction of Information Asymmetry

French language proficiency reduces information asymmetries by enabling investors to access primary data sources, including regulatory texts, local media, and market intelligence in their original form. This reduces dependence on intermediaries and improves the accuracy of risk assessment and investment forecasting.

In this sense, French functions as an informational infrastructure that enhances transparency and decision-making quality in uncertain emerging markets.

(c) Institutional Legitimacy and Governance Fit

French also operates as an institutional alignment mechanism. In Francophone Africa, where French is embedded in governance, law, and administrative systems, language proficiency enhances regulatory compliance and institutional credibility.

Shingleton (2024) emphasizes that French is essential for navigating legal frameworks, contracts, and compliance systems in West African economies. This institutional embeddedness transforms language into a legitimacy signal that reduces perceived investment risk and strengthens stakeholder trust.

(d) Network Integration and Embedded Market Access

French enables access to formal and informal business networks that are critical for deal sourcing, partnership formation, and market entry. These networks are actively reinforced by institutional platforms such as the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF, 2025), which facilitates cross-border economic missions and SME linkages.

Thus, French functions as a gateway to relational capital, embedding investors within Francophone economic ecosystems.

Empirical Convergence and Evidence Integration

The empirical literature demonstrates strong cross-level convergence supporting the economic value of French language skills.

- **Anikpe et al. (2024)** show that linguistic structures significantly shape FDI flows across West Africa, confirming language as a structural macroeconomic determinant.
- **Soussane et al. (2022)** demonstrate that linguistic proximity strongly influences Moroccan outward FDI location decisions.
- **Zhang et al. (2024)** find that language proficiency improves cross-border M&A performance across deal value, volume, and success rate.
- **OIF (2025)** provides institutional evidence that Francophone economic missions generate measurable commercial contracts.

This convergence across macro, meso, and micro levels confirms that French language proficiency is not a marginal factor but a systemic determinant of FDI performance and distribution.

Literature Gap Identification

Despite the growing body of research on FDI determinants in Africa, three key gaps remain in the literature that this study directly addresses:

Gap 1: Fragmented Treatment of Language in FDI Literature

Most FDI studies treat language as a secondary control variable rather than a structural determinant. As Zhang et al. (2024) note, language remains the “forgotten factor” in multinational management. Existing literature fails to systematically theorize language as economic capital rather than cultural context.

Gap 2: Lack of Integrated Multi-Level Analysis

While some studies examine macro-level FDI flows (Anikpe et al., 2024) and others focus on firm-level decisions (Soussane et al., 2022), there is limited integration across macro, meso, and micro levels. This fragmentation limits theoretical generalization.

Gap 3: Under-theorization of Francophone Africa as an Economic System

Existing research rarely conceptualizes Francophone Africa as a linguistically integrated economic space. The institutional and network effects of French across borders remain underexplored despite evidence of initiatives such as OIF (2025).

Theoretical and Empirical Contribution of the Study

This study makes four key contributions to the literature:

Contribution 1: Language as Systemic Economic Capital

The study advances the argument that French language is not merely a communication tool but a form of economic capital that simultaneously reduces transaction costs, improves information efficiency, and enhances institutional trust.

Contribution 2: Multi-Level Analytical Integration

By synthesizing macro (country-level), meso (institutional/regional), and micro (firm-level) evidence, this study offers a unified analytical framework for understanding how language affects FDI.

This addresses the fragmentation in existing literature by demonstrating cross-level consistency in empirical findings.

Contribution 3: Reinterpretation of the Francophone Paradox

Rather than treating limited intra-Francophone trade as a structural weakness, this study reframes it as an **opportunity space** for investors with linguistic competence. The “Francophone paradox” is therefore reconceptualized as **latent economic potential rather than inefficiency**.

Contribution 4: Expansion of FDI Theory in Emerging Markets

The findings extend traditional FDI theories (transaction cost theory, institutional theory, and human capital theory) by integrating **language capital as a mediating variable** that shapes investment flows in emerging African economies.

Synthesis: From Gap to Contribution

Overall, the literature reveals a consistent oversight: while FDI research extensively examines capital, institutions, and infrastructure, it underestimates the role of language as a structural determinant of investment behavior.

This study addresses that gap by demonstrating that French language proficiency:

- Operates as economic capital (Wei et al., 2018),
- Structures investment location decisions (Soussane et al., 2022),
- Enhances cross-border firm performance (Zhang et al., 2024),
- And enables institutional economic coordination (OIF, 2025).

Concluding Analytical Insight

The integration of mechanisms, empirical evidence, and theoretical gaps leads to a central conclusion: **French language skills are not peripheral advantages but core components of investment ecosystems in Francophone Africa.**

By bridging fragmented literature and offering a multi-level analytical synthesis, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how language operates within global investment flows, particularly in emerging African markets.

Policy Recommendations and Future Directions

The evidence presented in this paper supports a clear conclusion that French language skills create significant economic value in emerging African markets. Below are practical recommendations for seizing this opportunity.

For Students and Young Professionals

For students considering language study and young professionals planning careers, the message is clear, French skills are a valuable career asset.

- i. **Invest in active language skills.** Zhang et al. (2024) demonstrate that output ability which is writing and speaking matters more than input ability for complex business transactions. Focus on developing the confidence to communicate actively in French, not merely to understand.
- ii. **Combine French with professional expertise.** The complementarity between language capital and human capital (Wei et al., 2018) means that French skills create maximum value when combined with technical or professional competencies. Consider pairing French study with training in business, law, engineering, or other fields relevant to African development.
- iii. **Seek immersive experiences.** The network effects of language (OIF, 2025) mean that proficiency opens doors to relationships and opportunities. Seek internships, study abroad programs, or professional experiences in Francophone Africa that allow you to activate and deepen your language skills while building professional networks.
- iv. **Understand the demographic trajectory.** With 80% of French speakers projected to reside in Africa by 2050 (Babbel for Business, 2025), French is increasingly an African language. Students who develop French skills position themselves at the heart of one of the world's most dynamic economic regions.

For Investors and Businesses

For investors and businesses seeking opportunities in Francophone Africa, French language skills offer genuine competitive advantage.

- i. **Invest in language capabilities.** Whether through hiring French-proficient staff, providing language training to existing employees, or partnering with Francophone firms, developing linguistic competence should be a strategic priority for any business targeting Francophone African markets.
- ii. **Recognise the differentiation advantage.** With many international companies still focusing primarily on English, French language capabilities provide significant competitive edge (Shingleton, 2024). This differentiation enables deeper market penetration and stronger local connections.
- iii. **Leverage institutional networks.** The OIF's economic missions and similar initiatives provide platforms for connecting with Francophone entrepreneurs and opportunities (OIF, 2025). Active participation in these networks can generate deal flow and partnerships.
- iv. **Understand sectoral opportunities.** Different sectors may reward French skills differently. Research the specific linguistic demands of your target sector and adjust your language investments accordingly.
- v. **Think long-term about relationships.** French skills facilitate the trust-building and stakeholder engagement essential for successful long-term investment (Mbey et al., 2025). View language investment as part of relationship-building strategy rather than merely transaction facilitation.

For African Governments

For African governments seeking to attract FDI, investments in French language education should be understood as economic policy.

- i. **Invest in language capital.** According to Wei et al. (2018), language capital complements human capital in attracting FDI. Assess the returns to investments in French language proficiency as part of broader FDI attraction strategies.
- ii. **Consider linguistic targeting in investment promotion.** The finding that linguistic affinity matters particularly for SMEs (Zhang et al., 2024) and for investors from countries sharing institutional structures (Soussane et al., 2022) suggests that targeted promotion efforts focused on Francophone investors may yield high returns.
- iii. **Enhance linguistic accessibility.** While maintaining French as the primary language of business, consider bilingual investment promotion materials and regulatory information to reduce barriers for non-Francophone investors while preserving French advantage.
- iv. **Address linguistic dimensions of regional integration.** With AfCFTA creating a single continental market, deliberate attention to cross-linguistic connectivity can help bridge the divide between Francophone and Anglophone business communities.

For Educational Institutions

For universities, language schools, and training providers, the growing economic value of French skills creates opportunities for program development.

- i. **Emphasise practical language skills.** Zhang et al. (2024)'s finding about the importance of output ability suggests that language programs should prioritise active communication skills alongside traditional language instruction.
- ii. **Integrate language with professional education.** The complementarity between language capital and human capital (Wei et al., 2018) suggests value in programs that combine French instruction with business, law, or technical training.
- iii. **Facilitate immersive experiences.** Partnerships with institutions in Francophone Africa, internship programs, and study abroad opportunities can help students develop both language skills and professional networks.
- iv. **Conduct market-responsive program development.** Research the specific linguistic needs of industries investing in Francophone Africa and develop programs that address these needs.

For Students and Professionals

- Invest in active French communication skills
- Combine French with professional/technical training
- Pursue immersion in Francophone environments
- Leverage Africa's demographic shift in French usage

For Investors

- Build internal French language capacity
- Use French as a competitive differentiation tool
- Engage OIF and regional business networks
- Prioritize long-term relationship building

For Governments

- Treat language education as economic policy
- Integrate language into FDI strategy
- Strengthen bilingual investment frameworks
- Support regional linguistic integration

For Educational Institutions

- Emphasize communicative French skills
- Link language training with professional disciplines
- Expand industry-linked programs
- Promote immersion-based learning

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that French language skills constitute a significant determinant of Foreign Direct Investment in emerging African markets. Through reduced transaction costs, improved information access, enhanced institutional legitimacy, and expanded network participation, French functions as a form of economic capital.

The rise of “Francophonie économique” reflects growing recognition of language as a strategic economic resource. Far from being merely cultural or historical, French language proficiency represents a forward-looking economic asset in Africa’s evolving investment landscape.

With Africa projected to host the majority of French speakers by 2050, the economic importance of French will continue to grow. Understanding linguistic capital is therefore essential for investors, policymakers, and institutions seeking to engage with Africa’s dynamic markets.

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