

## LEVERAGING FRENCH LANGUAGE FOR SUSTAINABLE SPORTS DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

**Medina UKAH**

General Studies Department (French), National Institute for Sports, Surulere, Lagos  
[ukahmedina2020@gmail.com](mailto:ukahmedina2020@gmail.com) / (234) 8168927664

### **Abstract**

Sport, in addition to its entertaining value is recognized as an element of culture and social interconnection. It is also an effective instrument for human development as well as national and international cohesion. The advancement in technology and the advent of globalization brought to fore the increasing need of people of different origins and disciplines (including sport) to learn and speak more than one international language. More than before, language has gone beyond being a tool for communication, dissemination of information and knowledge sharing to become a key factor for the promotion of unity and rapprochement of people at the global level. It is in the light of this that this paper highlights the role of French language in ensuring effective and sustainable sport development in Nigeria. It concludes that in order to safeguard Nigerian athletes and sport administrators' continuous participation and contributions to global sports, there is the need for them to acquire some basic working knowledge of French language.

**Keywords:** Sports, international competition, French language, communication, sports development

### **Introduction**

Participation in sports brings people together and makes rivals to establish contacts among themselves and stay together and relish various opportunities offered by sports. Moronkola, Azubuike, Odior, Jimmy, Ajala, and Airebamen assert that engaging in sports is an avenue for developing loyalty, team spirit, sense of belonging, social inclusion, and community integration (19). According to Jimmy, the sports industry in the last three decades has grown to become a global phenomenon ("Motivating athletes..." 16). He states further that sports is a vital and dependable weapon for all kinds of battles; it is today's greater marketing instrument for political mass mobilization and for direct governance and anchorage for national and international unity (Jimmy, "Podium Success..." 9).

On his part, Omezi defines sports as a vehicle for building friendship and promoting relationship between individuals, groups and nations. He explains further that sports are platforms for advancing peace, unity and integration. Sports have proven to be an agent of socialization among people irrespective of race, colour, age or sex (3).

Sports development strategies are often developed by great nations of the world as a way of enhancing their citizens' sports performance and achievements and at the same time exhibiting their supremacy over others nations. Effective sports development has therefore become an important approach towards sustainable sports growth.

This paper focuses on the first component of the Sports Development Policy for Nigeria (1989) which is International Sports. International sports or competitions refer to events where athletes from different countries compete against each other, representing their respective nations. In the course of such competitions, sport men and women meet and interact with their counterparts from other countries, who in most cases do not speak their languages. In most situations, there are instances of break in communication and

sometimes frustrations among competitors because of not being able to speak each other's language.

The thrust of this paper is, therefore, to highlight the importance of French language as an essential tool for sustainable sports development in Nigeria. The paper strongly advocates that the teaching of language to Nigerian sports men and women will not only boost their communication skills during international competitions, facilitate cooperation with their francophone counterparts and enhance their participation in regional and global sports events

### **Definition of key concepts**

#### **Sports**

Sports are generally defined as a sum of physical activities or games that involve skills, strategy and competition. They are organized into different disciplines and executed according to specific rules. Sports are practiced by people of all ages and backgrounds around the world. They can be recreational, competitive or professional. They are practiced and enjoyed by individuals all over the world for their physical, mental and social benefits.

While the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines sports as "an activity involving physical exertion and skill in which an individual or team competes against another or others for entertainment", the *Cambridge English Dictionary*, describes sports as "games, competitions, and activities that involve physical effort and skill and are played or done according to rules, for enjoyment and/or as a job." These definitions highlight the key elements of sports namely physical exertion, skill, competition, and adherence to rules.

Quoting the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Sport for Development and Peace, Sutula explains that the term sport covers all forms of physical activity that promote good physical fitness, mental well-being and social interaction. It includes games, entertainment, recreational or competitive sporting events, as well as sports and traditional games (1). In other words, sport is a multifaceted entertaining and competitive activity through which people derive many advantages.

According to Loy, "Sport permeates any number of levels of contemporary society, and it touches upon and deeply influences such disparate elements as status, race relations, business life, automotive design, clothing styles, the concept of hero, language, and ethical values." (24). In other words, sports are practiced by all and sundry and hold significant importance to individuals and the society. They promote personal growth, foster teamwork and social cohesion thereby enhancing social interaction, teach discipline, determination and time management, and shape cultural identity and national pride.

#### **International Competition**

One of the key aspects of global sports is the participation in international competition. International competition involves athletes or teams from various countries competing against each other in various sporting events, fostering global connections, and promoting excellence in sports on an international scale. And according to the charter of the International Olympic Committee (IOC),

International competition refers to competitive events, tournaments, or contests that involve participants from multiple countries. These events

often serve as platforms for athletes, teams, or individuals to represent their respective nations and compete against counterparts from around the world. International competition spans various sports disciplines and levels of competition, ranging from grassroots and youth competitions to elite-level events such as the Olympics. (4)

This definition highpoints the essence of international competition emphasizing the participation of athletes or teams from diverse nations and the significance of representing one's country on the global stage. International competitions not only highlight athletic prowess but also promote cultural exchange, diplomacy, and camaraderie among nations of the world. International Sports is one of the five key components of the *Sports Development Policy for Nigeria* (1989). Others, as outlined in the document, are Indigenous sports, Stadium Management, Institutional sport and Sports Associations.

### **Sports Development**

“Sport” has been defined in terms of competitive, rule governed games involving some physical activity, while “development” invokes the notions of growth, progress, expansion, maturation, consolidation of knowledge, experience, competence and skills. Therefore, sports development can be broadly defined as a process aimed at enhancing active participation and developing skill acquisition for the overall growth of sports. According to the Sports for Development and Peace International Working Group, sport development is “the process of helping people to improve their skills and knowledge in sports and physical activities and to develop personal and social skills that can be used in everyday life”. (<https://sportsconflict.org/resource/sport-for-development-and-peace-international-working-group-sdp-iwg/>).

Quoting (Yazid, 2006), Mohammed defines sports development as “the gradual increase, attainment and advancement of sport from low level strata to a higher level or strata with due cognizance and consideration of the indices that enhance the realization and actualization of sports development” (51). In other words, the objective of sport development initiatives is to work towards the improvement of all key elements in the area of sports.

Sports development can also be considered as a process of continuous improvement of the sports structures, performances and programmes. It involves not only building sport facilities, creating conducive conditions for athletes’ training, caring for their wellbeing but also equipping them with the needed international language competence to enable them to effectively and efficiently participate in international completions.

Sports development is a crucial to promoting physical and mental health, fostering social cohesion, empowering youth, simulating economic growth, enhancing community engagement and promoting active participation in international sports competition. Successful sports development depends largely on effective partnership and networking with a wide range of national and international sports governing bodies, sports administrators, service providers, facility operators. This underscores the importance of communicative competence in foreign languages and gives impetus to the thrust of this paper.

### **Communication and Sports Development**

There is no definite definition for communication. Various definitions are given according to different discipline. Communication can be explained, in general term as an

act of transmitting information or messages from one end to the other. Specifically it is seen as an act of establishing interactive session between two or more people. It is the binding force that stimulates interpersonal relationship, and helps to distinguish human beings from all other creatures.

According to the *International Encyclopedia of Communication*, communication is defined as "the process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior." This definition emphasizes the essential components of communication, including the use of symbols or signs, the exchange of information, and the involvement of human interaction. Communication plays a crucial role in various aspects of human life, including personal relationships, business interactions, education, politics, media and sports.

The need for communication is a primary issue and, in the contemporary societies, it is a necessity means for survival. Ukah is of the view that communication is a binding wire, a unifying factor that helps to cement relationship and makes it easy for human beings to live together and function as a social group (3). Sports involves a large pool of human beings of different historical and cultural background coming together to engage in competitions. To establish understanding and enhance cordial relationship among different people, there is need to put in place, an effective communication system that is capable of arousing and stimulating a good working relationship. In other words, sports men and women evolve in a setting that requires effective communication.

In sports, good communication arouses the emotional feelings of athletes and their coaches, and serves as a propelling force that drives them to increase their level of performances, which on the long run, will be of benefit to sports development. Communication also serves as an instrument of building attitude. Effective communication methods and operations in sports help to encourage networking among athletes and sports organizers, and thus stabilizes the system by ensuring that information flows without prejudice and that the feedback mechanism is highly encouraged. This brings about cordial relationship among the various interests operating within sports and this stabilizes the society at large and encourages other countries to show interest in sports participation.

Communication in sports also takes into cognizance the cultural heritage of the host community where the competition is taking place. Culture, according to Sowale and Onoja, is the total way of life of the people that is commonly shared among them and passed from one generation to another (28). To be able to maximize the benefits of the host community, the communication system that operates within the sports arena must be the one that accord utmost respect to the cultural heritage of the people in terms of use of language.

Communication is important in sports development both locally and internationally. There is no doubting the fact that the knowledge of foreign languages play a crucial role in international sporting competitions. It influences various aspects ranging from communication among athletes, officials, and spectators to media coverage and promotional activities. For effective communication to take place, especially during international sporting events, the mastery of more than one international language is of paramount importance. In other words the knowledge of foreign languages serves as a unifying force in international sports competitions, enabling clear communication, promoting cultural understanding, and enhancing the overall experience for athletes,

officials, and spectators alike. It also influences various aspects of sports diplomacy, media coverage, and fan engagement on a global scale.

According to Ajiboye, language in relation to sports is a system of communication (70). This implies that language helps to facilitate easy communication between individuals and groups in the area of sports. Therefore, to ensure an all-encompassing sports development in Nigeria, sports men and women as well as other stakeholders in the business of sports must be bilingual in English and French.

### **French Language and Sports Development in Nigeria**

One of the objectives of sports is the fostering unity and the spirit of working together in order to achieve the set goals. Considering the importance of French language in the world and the fact that Nigeria is surrounded by francophone country, there is the need to remove the French language barrier in order to ensure enhanced sports development in Nigeria. Sports has also become a symbol of national and international unity. Today, French language has gone beyond being a tool for, communication, dissemination of information and knowledge sharing to become a key factor for the promotion of unity and rapprochement of other athletes and sports officials at the global level. Therefore, the role of the French language in ensuring effective and sustainable sports development in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized.

The knowledge of French language will enable Nigerian sports men and women to interact with other sports men and women without the help of an interpreter and this will encourage and facilitate their participation in international sporting activities. And, as Adegboku rightly points out, the mastery and practice of a foreign language like French can bring about a number of important advantages to the citizens of a nation like Nigeria (268). These include language integration, regional cooperation, and removal of language barriers during competitions, facilitation of communication of athletes and officials during their passage at francophone borders. The objective of language integration to sports is the promotion of social and cultural development and integration of African sports men and women in order to sustain development of sports.

On his part, Adebisi explains that French language occupies a special place in view of the fact that nine of the fifteen member countries of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) are Francophone. According to him, Africa is also a continent with the greatest number of French-speaking people in the world. He is of the opinion that no Nigerian has any sufficiently valid reason, in the current world, to remain a monolingual, especially with the availability of performing teaching/learning methods and more importantly as well innumerable digital resources online (76-79). In order words, Nigerian sport men and women do not have any reason for not learning French language. Their fluency in French will give them more confidence in communication and facilitate their active participation in sporting activities organized in Francophone countries.

The ability to use fluently foreign languages is of a glaring importance today because it opens a larger window on the rest of the world; it affords us a socio-cultural competence useful in our dealing with people in a more and more globalized world. In Nigeria, the knowledge of French will help athletes to understand other francophone people, learn about their cultures and visions of the world, and more importantly communicate with them without much hindrance. Here are more reasons why French language could serve as a tool for sustainable sports development in Nigeria:

Nigeria is not only surrounded by Francophone countries, she is also a home to diverse ethnic groups and communities, including some with historical ties to Francophone regions or neighboring countries where French is spoken. The knowledge of French in these communities will promote cultural exchange that includes sporting activities or events. And as rightly observed by Ukah, the only way to improve integration through sports is the removal of all language barriers (10). By doing this, sports administrators, coaches and athletes will be able to communicate in French language with their counterparts globally. This will make them not just bilingual in two international languages but enable them to transfer their knowledge and share the culture of their homelands with others globally and thus, integration, knowledge sharing is enhanced.

According to Ikhioya, the place of athletes and sports administrators as the center of the international sporting process or essence cannot be overemphasized (30). As of recent CAF has made it compulsory for any coach who wants to be employed by CAF, the need to acquire some basic working knowledge of French language in order to fit into the sports coaching profession globally. This underscores another reason why Nigerian sports administrators and auxiliary staff need to learn the French language. In this perspective, it is encouraging to note that the *Prospectus of the National Institute for Sports in Nigeria* (2000) states that the teaching and learning of French language is mandatory for all the coaches, sports administrators and athletes to enable them acquire some basic working knowledge of the language for the purpose of communication and knowledge sharing with their Francophone counterparts globally and safeguard them of continuous participation and contribution to global sporting activities.

In global sports, French language serves as a diplomatic tool for the purpose of international sporting relations. Many French-speaking countries and organizations are involved in numerous sporting initiatives, exchanges, events, cultural exchange and cooperation. The knowledge of French language by Nigerians will help to derive many benefits from francophone sports organization, promote linguistic diversity and strengthen ties with French-speaking nations.

The learning of French by Nigerian athletes will also enhance their participation in the numerous prestigious sporting events usually hosted by France such as the Tour de France, the French Open (Roland-Garros), and the FIFA World Cup. Since the promotion of these events often involves the use of French language and terminology, knowing how to speak the language will facilitate Nigerians' seamless participation.

Furthermore considering the fact that French is one of the official languages of many international sporting organizations, including the International Olympic Committee, FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association), WAFU and CAF, and that many sporting terms and expressions used worldwide have French origins, it is imperative for Nigerian athletes and sports administrators to learn French. The fact that Nigeria maintains diplomatic relations with French-speaking countries and is a member of international sports organizations is another major reason why her sports men and women need to study the French language. This will go a long way in promoting diplomatic interactions and cultural exchanges between Nigeria and Francophone nations in sports-related activities.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

No country in the world has been able to shut its frontiers to foreign languages. In the case of Nigeria, her location in the midst of Francophone countries, her membership of numerous international organizations, and her active participation in international events including sporting activities, makes the acquisition of the French language by her sports men and women imperative. In this era of globalization, characterized by technological advancement, the knowledge of at least two international languages is imperative for all and sundry.

Towards ensuring effective and sustainable sports development in Nigeria, there is the need to remove the lingering linguistic barriers through the learning of French language. This will ensure and facilitate Nigerian sports men and women's active participation in international sporting events.

The knowledge of French language is an asset to the coaches, administrators and athletes for sports development in Nigeria. It is essential that every coach, athlete and sport administrator strive to acquire some basic working knowledge of French language for continuous participation and contributions to global sports. With the position of France in contemporary world politics, and particularly in the United Nations systems, the knowledge of French by Nigerians will greatly enhance Nigeria's relevance in world affairs, in general, and in international sports in particular. For example, the hosting of the Olympic Games in France in 2024, also underscores the need for Nigerian sports men and women to be proficient in French in order to ensure seamless communication and interaction with the French people and all other francophone participants.

Leveraging the French language for sustainable sports development in Nigeria involves tapping into linguistic and cultural resources available in the country in order to enhance international cooperation, promote Nigerians participation in global sporting events. Here are some recommendations in that regard:

1. Provision of access to French-language resources, materials, and training programs related to sports administration, coaching, and management through efficient capacity building programmes. This will, no doubt, enhance the French linguistic skills and capacities of Nigerian sports professionals. Government's efforts can be supported by partnerships with French-speaking institutions and sports federations.
2. Introduction of bilingual sports programs in Nigeria that incorporate French language instruction alongside sports training in order to promote bilingualism and enhance linguistic diversity and cultural exchange among Nigerian athletes. Such programs should focus on communities along the Francophone borders all those engaged in sports activities:
3. Engaging in collaboration with Francophone sporting organizations, such as those in neighboring countries or within the Francophone network. This will facilitate knowledge sharing, training exchanges, and joint sporting events. In the course of such partnerships, participants can leverage the French language as a medium of communication and foster sustainable sports development in Nigeria.
4. Supporting the participation of Nigerian athletes, teams, and officials in Francophone sporting events, tournaments, and championships. This will create avenues for exposure, networking opportunities, and competitive experiences. The knowledge of French by athletes and sports administrators will facilitate seamless engagement in such events.

5. Organizing cultural exchange programs, youth camps, or sports festivals that integrate French language learning with sports activities will help in promoting cross-cultural understanding and cooperation. Such initiatives will foster a sense of belonging among Nigerian youth and promote the value of linguistic diversity in sports development.

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