# EXPLORING THE INTERCONNECTION BETWEEN LANGUAGE USE AND IDENTITY FORMATION AMONG JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL FRENCH LEARNERS IN LAGOS STATE, NIGERIA

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**Abstract**

*This study examined the relationship between language use and identity formation among Junior Secondary School French learners in Lagos State, Nigeria. Using an exploratory research design, data were collected from 100 Basic 8 students through a structured questionnaire with a reliability coefficient of 0.82. Descriptive statistics and Chi-square tests were used for analysis. Findings showed that learning French positively influenced students' personal and social identity, enhancing their confidence, perceptions, and social connections, while 81% of students reported increased cultural awareness. Furthermore, 88% emphasized that learner experiences should inform curriculum and policy. However, Chi-square tests indicated that sociocultural factors and current teaching methods had no significant statistical impact on engagement or identity development. The study concludes that French supports identity formation and intercultural competence, highlighting the need for learner-centred curriculum and improved teaching strategies.*

**Keywords**: Exploring, Interconnection, Language Use, Identity Formation.

**Introduction**

Language is not only a tool for communication but also a powerful symbol that shapes personal, social, and cultural identities. In multilingual societies like Nigeria, where students are often exposed to multiple languages from an early age, the process of identity construction becomes particularly complex (Bucholtz & Hall, 2021). French, as a second foreign language introduced into the Nigerian educational curriculum, plays a unique role in this linguistic mosaic. For junior secondary school students in Lagos State, a cosmopolitan urban centre with diverse linguistic practices, learning French may influence how they perceive themselves in relation to local, national, and global communities. Scholars argue that language is deeply embedded in power dynamics and social hierarchies, meaning that the adoption or rejection of a language like French can reflect broader socio-

political attitudes and aspirations (Norton, 2021; Yusuf & Salawu, 2022). This underscores the need to examine how learning French contributes to identity formation among young learners in Lagos, especially given the historical and policy context surrounding language education in Nigeria.

The inclusion of French in the Nigerian school system dates back to post-independence efforts aimed at fostering regional cooperation within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), where both English and French are official languages (Bamgbose, 2020). However, despite its official status, French remains marginalised compared to English, which dominates in administration, media, and formal education. This imbalance has implications for how students view French as either a prestigious international language or a distant academic requirement with limited practical relevance. Recent studies show that Nigerian students often perceive French as difficult and irrelevant, particularly when it is taught without adequate contextualization or exposure to Francophone cultures (Salawu, 2021; Yusuf & Salawu, 2022). Moreover, the shortage of trained teachers and instructional resources continues to undermine effective French instruction in public schools (Akande, 2021). These structural issues not only affect proficiency levels but also shape students' emotional and cognitive engagement with the language, influencing how they identify with it on a personal level.

In Lagos State specifically, junior secondary school students navigate a highly multilingual environment where code-switching and code-mixing are common communicative strategies. Yoruba, English, Pidgin, and increasingly French coexist in classrooms, homes, and digital spaces, creating a dynamic linguistic ecology (Bucholtz & Hall, 2021). The presence of French in this mix introduces new dimensions to identity negotiation, as students associate different languages with distinct social roles and statuses. Recent findings indicate that students who engage with French may adopt different personas or affiliations depending on the context, projecting competence and sophistication in academic spaces while using Yoruba or Pidgin for informal interactions (Norton, 2021). This linguistic flexibility highlights how identity is fluid and context-dependent, shaped by both internal motivations and external societal pressures related to language use.

Furthermore, gender, socioeconomic background, and access to extracurricular opportunities significantly influence how students relate to French and construct their

identities around it. Studies have shown that female students tend to demonstrate greater interest and higher performance in French than male students, possibly due to differences in motivation, classroom participation, and societal expectations regarding language learning (Abiodun, 2020; Yusuf & Salawu, 2022). Similarly, students from affluent families may have better access to private tutors, French films, and online resources, enabling them to develop a more positive disposition toward the language (Akande, 2021). Conversely, students from lower-income backgrounds may view French as elitist or impractical, reinforcing a sense of alienation from the language and limiting its potential role in identity development. These disparities underscore the intersectionality of language learning, where factors beyond linguistic competence, including class, gender, and exposure shape students' experiences and self-perceptions in profound ways.

The digital era has further introduced new ways through which students interact with languages outside formal education. Social media, online platforms, and global media expose Nigerian youth to French in contexts far removed from traditional classroom settings (UNESCO, 2022). However, these informal encounters with French are rarely integrated into school curricula, leading to a disconnect between what students learn in class and how they experience the language in real life (Yusuf & Salawu, 2022). While recent reforms by the Federal Ministry of Education have sought to improve French education through updated curricula, teacher training, and international partnerships, research shows that these efforts often fail to address the sociolinguistic realities of students' everyday lives (Federal Ministry of Education, 2020; Akande, 2021). Without meaningful alignment between classroom instruction and lived linguistic experiences, the potential of French to contribute to identity formation and intercultural understanding remains largely untapped.

Given these challenges and opportunities, there is a pressing need to explore how junior secondary school students in Lagos negotiate their identities through learning French. This study therefore situates itself at the intersection of language policy, pedagogy, and identity construction, responding to calls for more context-sensitive research on the role of French in shaping the experiences of young Nigerians (Norton, 2021; Bucholtz & Hall, 2021).

**Research Questions**

The following research questions were formulated to guide this study

1. How does learning French influence the personal and social identity formation of junior secondary school students in Lagos State?

2. What are the sociocultural and educational experiences of junior secondary school students learning French in Lagos State?

3. In what ways can the experiences and identity development of French learners inform language policy and curriculum development in Nigerian secondary schools?

**Research Hypotheses**

$HO_1$: There is no significant impact of learning French on the identity formation of junior secondary school students in Lagos State.

$HO_2$: There is no significant impact of sociocultural factors on students' engagement with the French language in Lagos State.

$HO_3$: There is no significant impact of current teaching methods and curriculum design on students' proficiency and identity development in French language learning.

**Methodology**

This study employed an exploratory research design, chosen because the topic of maintenance strategies of cultural policing has received little or no empirical investigation. Exploratory design is appropriate for studies with limited foundational information and typically involves smaller sample sizes compared to survey designs. The target population consisted of all Junior Secondary School students studying French in Lagos State, specifically Basic 8 (formerly JSS 2) students within Ojo Local Government Area. A sample of 100 students was selected using simple random sampling, ensuring that each student had an equal chance of being included. This approach reduces selection bias and allows for generalization of findings within the population studied.

A structured questionnaire was used to generate relevant data. The questionnaire was divided into two sections. Section A captured demographic information, while Section B addressed the study variables and was designed by the researcher using a 4-point Likert scale rated as follows: Strongly Agreed (4 points), Agreed (3 points), Disagreed (2 points), and Strongly Disagreed (1 point). Data collection was carried out personally by the

research team, who visited the participating schools to administer the instruments. Before administering them, the researchers explained the purpose of the study, obtained informed consent from the participants, and assured them of confidentiality and the strictly academic use of their responses. The responses obtained from the pilot test were subjected to a reliability analysis using Cronbach's Alpha.

The instrument yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.82, which indicated a high level of internal consistency and showed that the questionnaire was suitable for use in the main study. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the relevant school authorities before data collection commenced. The researchers visited the selected junior secondary schools within Ojo Local Government Area and administered the questionnaires to the respondents during normal school hours. The questionnaires were distributed and completed on the spot to ensure a high response rate and to prevent loss of instruments. Clear instructions were given to the students on how to respond to the items, and the researchers were present to clarify any questions where necessary.

Completed questionnaires were collected immediately after completion, checked for completeness, and coded for analysis. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages to answer the three research questions. Chi-square statistics were used to test all hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance, allowing for the determination of relationships between variables and the validation of the study's assumptions.

**Results**

**Research Question One**

How does learning French influence the personal and social identity formation of junior secondary school students in Lagos State?

Table 1: Response on learning French influence the personal and social identity formation

| Items | SA | A | D | SD | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Confiance | 7 | 8 | 3 | 2 | 20 |
| Respect | 10 | 6 | 3 | 1 | 20 |
| Perception | 9 | 7 | 3 | 1 | 20 |
| **Appartenance** | 11 | 5 | 3 | 1 | 20 |

| Connexion | 9 | 4 | 6 | 1 | 20 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total | 46 | 30 | 18 | 6 | 100 |
| Grand total | | 76 | | 24 | |
| Percentage | | 76% | | 24% | |

Table 1 presents responses to how learning French influences the personal and social identity formation of junior secondary school students in Lagos State. Overall, the results show a strong positive perception. A total of 76% of respondents agreed (SA + A) that learning French contributes to aspects such as *confiance* (confidence), *respect*, *perception*, *appartenance* (sense of belonging), and *connexion* (connection). Only 24% disagreed (D + SD). These findings suggest that learning French plays a meaningful role in shaping both personal and social identity among students, enhancing their self-confidence, social relationships, and sense of belonging within a multilingual context. This implies that French language education may serve as an important tool for identity development in junior secondary schools in Lagos State.

**Hypotheses 1:** There is no significant impact of learning French on the identity formation of junior secondary school students in Lagos State.

**Table 2:**

| Chi-Square Tests | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Value** | **df** | **Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)** |
| Pearson Chi-Square | 17.444[a] | 36 | .996 |
| Likelihood Ratio | 16.833 | 36 | .997 |
| Linear-by-Linear Association | .065 | 1 | .798 |
| N of Valid Cases | 100 | | |

From the table 2, the result of the Chi-square analysis indicates that there is no significant impact of learning French on the identity formation of junior secondary school students in Lagos State ($\chi^2$ = 17.444, df = 36, p = 0.996). Since the p-value exceeds the 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis was retained. This suggests that although students may express opinions about the influence of French on identity, such perceptions do not translate into a statistically significant relationship.

**Research Question Two**

What are the sociocultural and educational experiences of junior secondary school students learning French in Lagos State?

Table 3: Learning French helps me appreciate different cultures and traditions outside Nigeria

| Items | SA | A | D | SD | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agree | 8 | 8 | 2 | 2 | 20 |
| Supported | 5 | 10 | 2 | 3 | 20 |
| Relatable | 10 | 7 | 1 | 2 | 20 |
| Engaging | 10 | 9 | 1 | 0 | 20 |
| Effective | 4 | 10 | 3 | 3 | 20 |
| Total | 37 | 44 | 9 | 10 | 100 |
| Grand total | 81 | | 19 | | |
| Percentage | 81% | | 19% | | |

Table 3 presents students' responses on whether learning French helps them appreciate different cultures and traditions outside Nigeria. The results show that a large majority of the respondents agreed with the statement. Specifically, 81% of students expressed agreement (combining *Strongly Agree* and *Agree*), while only 19% disagreed. These findings suggest that junior secondary school students in Lagos State generally perceive French learning as culturally enriching. The high level of agreement indicates that exposure to the French language contributes positively to students' sociocultural awareness, supporting the view that foreign language education enhances intercultural understanding among learners.

**Hypotheses 2:** There is no significant impact of sociocultural factors on students' engagement with the French language in Lagos State

**Table 4:**

| Chi-Square Tests | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Value** | **df** | **Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)** |
| Pearson Chi-Square | 30.972[a] | 48 | .973 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Likelihood Ratio | 33.935 | 48 | .938 |
| Linear-by-Linear Association | .011 | 1 | .916 |
| N of Valid Cases | 100 | | |

From the table 4, the Chi-square test result revealed no significant impact of sociocultural factors on students' engagement with the French language in Lagos State ($\chi^2$ = 30.972, df = 48, p = 0.973). As the p-value is greater than the 0.05 significance level, the null hypothesis was retained. This implies that students' engagement with French is not significantly influenced by sociocultural factors within the context of this study.

**Research Question Three**

In what ways can the experiences and identity development of French learners inform language policy and curriculum development in Nigerian secondary schools?

Table 5: The experiences of French learners in Nigerian secondary schools should be considered when developing language policies.

| Items | SA | A | D | SD | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Consideration | 9 | 8 | 2 | 1 | 20 |
| Identity | 10 | 8 | 2 | 0 | 20 |
| Motivation | 8 | 11 | 1 | 0 | 20 |
| Challenges | 7 | 8 | 4 | 1 | 20 |
| Relevance | 9 | 10 | 1 | 0 | 20 |
| Total | 43 | 45 | 10 | 2 | 100 |
| Grand total | 88 | | 12 | | |
| Percentage | 88% | | 12% | | |

Table 5 presents respondents' views on the extent to which the experiences of French learners in Nigerian secondary schools should inform language policy and curriculum development. Overall, the findings show a strong positive consensus. As indicated in the table, **88%** of respondents agreed (SA + A) that learners' experiences such as their sense of identity, motivation, challenges, and perceived relevance should be considered when

formulating language policies, whereas only **12%** disagreed (D + SD). This suggests that stakeholders recognize the importance of grounding language policy decisions in learners' real-life experiences, which aligns with learner-centred curriculum principles. Consequently, incorporating students' identities, motivations, and challenges into policy development may improve the effectiveness and relevance of French language education in Nigerian secondary schools.

**Hypothesis 3:** There is no significant impact of current teaching methods and curriculum design on students' proficiency and identity development in French language learning

**Table 6:**

| Chi-Square Tests | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Value** | **df** | **Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)** |
| Pearson Chi-Square | 11.058[a] | 28 | .998 |
| Likelihood Ratio | 12.522 | 28 | .995 |
| Linear-by-Linear Association | .208 | 1 | .649 |
| N of Valid Cases | 100 | | |

30 cells (75.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .60.

The Chi-square analysis presented in Table 6 indicates that there is no significant impact of current teaching methods and curriculum design on students' proficiency and identity development in French language learning ($\chi^2$ = 11.058, df = 28, p = 0.998). Since the p-value exceeds the 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis was retained. This finding suggests that variations in teaching methods and curriculum design do not significantly influence students' proficiency and identity development in the context examined.

**Discussion of Findings**

Findings from Table 1 show that 76% of respondents agreed that learning French positively contributes to their identity formation, while 24% disagreed. Students reported enhanced confidence (confiance), respect, perception, sense of belonging (appurtenance), and social connection (connexion). These descriptive results indicate that students perceive French language learning as contributing positively to their personal and social identity. This suggests that French language learning may go beyond grammar and vocabulary

acquisition to influence students' self-perception and interpersonal relationships, which aligns with identity development theories that view language as a medium for social and personal identity construction.

However, the chi-square analysis for Hypothesis 1 revealed a non-significant relationship ($p = .996$). Since the p-value is greater than the 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis stating that learning French has no significant impact on identity formation was retained. This indicates that although a majority of students perceive French as influencing their identity, this perception does not translate into a statistically significant impact. Therefore, while French language learning may be associated with positive identity-related experiences at a descriptive level, the inferential evidence does not support a significant effect on students' identity formation.

Table 3 shows that 81% of respondents agreed that learning French helps them appreciate different cultures and traditions outside Nigeria, while 19% disagreed. This strong agreement suggests that French language learning exposes students to diverse cultural practices, values, and perspectives, thereby enhancing their sociocultural awareness. Students' descriptions of French as "engaging," "relatable," and "supportive" further indicate that cultural exposure through language learning is perceived as enriching and motivating. This aligns with studies that highlight the role of foreign language education in promoting intercultural competence among learners.

Despite these positive perceptions, the chi-square analysis for Hypothesis 2 revealed a non-significant relationship between sociocultural factors and students' engagement with the French language ($p = .973$). Since the p-value exceeds the 0.05 significance level, the null hypothesis was retained. This implies that although students acknowledge the sociocultural value of learning French, these factors do not significantly determine their level of engagement in a statistical sense. Students' engagement may therefore be influenced by other variables such as instructional methods, curriculum structure, or individual learner motivation rather than sociocultural factors alone.

Results from Table 5 show that 88% of respondents agreed that learners' identity, motivation, challenges, and lived experiences should be considered in language policy formulation and curriculum design, while 12% disagreed. These findings reflect students' strong support for learner-centred approaches to curriculum development and are

consistent with contemporary curriculum theories that emphasise relevance, inclusivity, and responsiveness to learners' backgrounds and experiences.

However, the chi-square analysis for Hypothesis 3 indicated a non-significant relationship between current teaching methods and curriculum design and students' proficiency and identity development (p = .998). As the p-value is greater than 0.05, the null hypothesis was retained. This suggests that although students believe learner experiences should inform curriculum design, the existing teaching methods and curriculum structure do not significantly influence students' proficiency or identity development in French. This may indicate a gap between policy intentions and classroom practice, where learner-centred principles are recognised but not yet effectively implemented.

**Conclusion**

This study investigated the interconnection between language use and identity formation among junior secondary school French learners in Lagos state, Nigeria. Descriptive findings revealed that a majority of students perceive French learning as positively contributing to their confidence, sense of belonging, and cultural awareness. These perceptions suggest that French holds symbolic and experiential value for students within Lagos State's multilingual environment.

However, inferential analyses showed no statistically significant relationships between learning French and identity formation, between sociocultural factors and student engagement, or between teaching methods and curriculum design and students' proficiency and identity development. The consistent retention of the null hypotheses indicates that while students value French at a perceptual level, these perceptions do not translate into measurable statistical impact within the scope of this study.

The findings suggest that the role of French in identity development may be indirect, gradual, or mediated by contextual and pedagogical factors not fully captured through survey-based analysis. Overall, the study highlights a gap between students' positive experiences with French and the structural and instructional conditions necessary for these experiences to produce significant educational outcomes. Addressing this gap is essential for enhancing the effectiveness of French language education in Lagos State secondary schools.

**Recommendations**

Based on the findings, it was recommended that:

1. French language teaching should be better contextualised to reflect students' everyday experiences and social realities in Lagos State.

2. Regular professional development programmes should be organised for French teachers to promote learner-centred and interactive teaching strategies.

3. The French language curriculum should be reviewed and updated to emphasise practical use, cultural relevance, and student engagement.

4. Digital and informal learning resources such as videos, online platforms, and multimedia materials should be integrated into French language instruction.

5. Government and school authorities should provide adequate and equitable instructional resources for effective French language teaching.

6. Future studies should adopt larger samples and mixed research methods to gain deeper insights into French language learning and identity formation.

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