Role of the French Language in Regional and International Trade and Tourism Promotion

Assessment of the Benefits to Uganda during the Covid-19 pandemic and digital era

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Résumé : La présente étude examine les principaux obstacles que rencontrent le secteur du commerce et du tourisme ougandais sur le marché francophone pendant la pandémie de Covid-19 et à l'ère numérique. L'objectif est de déterminer l'importance de la langue française pour les entreprises ougandaises et le secteur du tourisme et de l'hôtellerie sur le marché mondial. L'étude s'appuie sur des références diversifiées pour indiquer la valeur de l'apprentissage d'une langue étrangère, la manière dont une telle formation peut être utilisée et plusieurs autres considérations fondamentales relatives à la langue française et à son emploi en Ouganda. Des données ont été recueillies à partir d'une enquête par sondage auprès des entreprises en Ouganda afin de déterminer l'importance de la connaissance de la langue et de la culture françaises pour les entreprises souhaitant apparaître sur le marché francophone. Sur la base des résultats, il est recommandé que le français devienne un élément essentiel du plan stratégique de l'Ouganda. Le français est nécessaire pour une participation efficace au régionalisme et à l'internationalisme. Le multilinguisme offre un avantage concurrentiel sur le marché du travail actuel.

Mots-clés : commerce et tourisme, langue française, avantages, marché mondial, avancées technologiques, Covid-19

Abstract: The present study examines the main obstacles for Uganda's trade and tourism sector to enter the French-speaking market to sustain growth during the Covid-19 pandemic and digital era. The objective of the research is to determine the significance of the French language for Ugandan business companies and the tourism and hospitality sector in the global francophone market. The study draws on a wide-range and diverse base of literature in order to indicate the value of learning a foreign language, the manner in which such training can be utilized and several other fundamental considerations relating to language and employment in Uganda. Data was collected from a sample survey of companies in Uganda in order to determine the importance of French language and culture knowledge for companies wishing to appear on the French-speaking market. Basing on the results, it is recommended that French language needs to become an essential part of Uganda's strategic plan. In addition, French language is required for effective participation in regionalism and internationalism. The study underscores that Multilingualism provides a competitive edge in today's job market.

Keywords: Trade and Tourism, French Language, Benefits, Global Market, Technological Advancements, Covid-19

1 Introduction

The current study was conducted in Uganda's trade and tourism sector in order to shed light on the need for French language in professional contacts and networks with French-speaking markets. Uganda is located in the East African Community (EAC) which spans from the Indian Ocean to the Atlantic Ocean making the region competitive and easy to access the larger African Continental Free Trade Area (AFCFTA). *The country* is centrally located in the Great Lakes Region, and although it is disadvantaged by being land locked, it has a potential in agriculture, tourism and mineral resources for which it must find markets. Uganda is also well located, surrounded by big countries with high populations like DR Congo (95.7 million), Kenya (47.8 million), Tanzania (50.8 million), Sudan (39.1 million), Burundi (12.6 million) and Rwanda (13.6million) for which the country must take advantage in terms of market access. Further, globalization has changed the business environment and Uganda as a country is not an exception. Communication plays a vital role in business management. In Uganda, a part from using English language as the only medium for promoting trade and tourism, the country needs to develop and use other international languages like French, Arabic, Chines., German for trade and Tourism destination marketing and management. This will enable to bridge the linguistic and cultural insecurity gap within the traders and tourists.

Ugandan Speakers in trade or tourist contexts must be able to adapt in order to accommodate to their interlocutors. Being accommodative in a face-to-face interaction between international tourists and tourism professionals in a Tourist Office instills confidence in tourists and repairs or prevents communicative difficulties. This helps to overcome communicative problems and co-construct understanding. Finally, language ideology is shown to be a key factor in the dynamics underlying processes of accommodation in the tourism industry.

Uganda's trade and tourism sector need to strategize and embrace French language as a professional language if Uganda is to tap opportunities from the Francophony markets. For instance, in 2020, French exports to Uganda totaled € 125.9 million (about shs 478 billion), while Uganda exported goods worth € 15.2 m (about 57.7 billion) to France at the same time. According to UBOS, in 2021, the top three countries exporting goods and services to Uganda were China ($1.3 billion), India ($841 million), and Tanzania ($811 million). UBOS reported that, in 2021, the United States exported goods and services worth $130.6 million. In 2021, the top three countries importing goods and services from Uganda were the United Arab Emirates ($1.05 billion), Kenya ($534 million), and South Sudan ($481 million). The United States imported goods and services worth $68.6 million from Uganda during that period. In addition, Uganda's top 5 Export and Import partners comprise United Arab Emirates, 1,845 · 44.47 ; Kenya, 466 · 11.22 ; South Sudan, 357 · 8.61 ; Congo, Dem. Rep. 267 · 6.44 (worldbank.org/Country Snapshot/en/UGA). In 2018, Uganda's major trading partner countries for exports were Kenya, United Arab Emirates, South Sudan, Rwanda and Congo, Dem. Rep. and for imports they were China, India, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Kenya (worldbank.org/CountrySnapshot/en/UGA).In 2020,

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Uganda's Exports to France was US$8.98 (United Nations COMTRADE database on international trade).

At a glance, there exists a trade imbalance between Uganda and France. According to New Vision of July 16.2022, President Museveni who was represented by Prime Minister Robinah Nabbanja during the Bastille day on 14th July 2022, noted the trade imbalance between Uganda and France and requested France to open its markets, remove any trade barriers, and allow the French people to enjoy the best fruits and food from the Pearl of Africa. He added that Uganda launched the Parish Development Model in order to add value, supply France and widen Uganda's markets. One would argue that the trade imbalance between Uganda and France could have resulted from a probable language and cultural barriers hence affecting the volume and value of trade that could have been beneficial to both countries.

From the foregone statistics, Uganda is exporting less to France. One of the reasons could likely be communication barrier as an obstacle for Ugandan businesses to enter the French speaking market including limitations in ease of doing business and country branding. Uganda has a unique opportunity to reach its trade potential by urging business companies and tourism and hospitality sector to develop language management strategy. As underscored by the head of Alliance Française in Uganda, Magaly Losange: "The fact that East African Community decided to adopt French as the third official language will only give Ugandans reasons to embrace it." In addition, according to Uganda's Minister for East African Affairs Rebecca Kadaga, the Council of East African Ministers know the importance of learning French and that is the reason they recently endorsed the language as the third official language in East African Community countries. According to the outgone Ambassador of France to Uganda, Uganda is near the biggest French capital in the world; Kinshasa where she can do business. He recommended the need for Uganda to connect with those in West African countries and the French community worldwide through learning French. Indeed, the Democratic Republic of Congo is very big and very rich country and therefore there is need for Ugandans, Kenyans, South Sudanese and Tanzanians to learn French so that they can go there and easily communicate with people as they do business. On tourism, the Ambassador of France to Uganda highlighted that France which is the world's leading tour destination, with over 80 million visitors per year, is also one of the largest tourism markets in the world, with an estimated 1.6 million French visiting African countries each year. However, only 15,000 of these come to Uganda, compared to the 60,000 arrivals from the United Kingdom. This is largely attributed to the language barrier. The language and cultural gap is further demonstrated by the biggest inflow of French speaking tourists into other parts of Africa meanwhile a small number visiting Uganda, this points largely towards the convenience and the level of comfort and access to online French information which the tourists probably do not find with Uganda. If what the tourists go to see in the French speaking countries is also available in Uganda, then the gap is clearly partly a language issue.

This study therefore observed a dearth of studies addressing the strategies for the Ugandan trade and tourism sector to enter the French speaking market. The current

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study aims at filling this gap by examining the main obstacles for Uganda's trade and tourism sector to enter the French-speaking market to sustain growth during *the Covid-19 pandemic and digital era. Uganda as a* country must expand trade beyond its close neighbors to markets across Sub-Saharan Africa.

1.1 General Objective

The following are the objectives of the study:

i) To determine the significance of the French language for Ugandan business companies and the tourism and hospitality sector in the global market.

ii) To highlight the main obstacle for Ugandan business companies and the tourism and hospitality sector to enter the French-speaking market

iii) To know the importance of knowledge of French language (place where the business is located) and multilingual skill for a non-native entrepreneur.

iv) To find out whether language proficiency of the entrepreneurs has any impact on their business operation.

1.2 Hypothesis

The hypothesis of the study is that business companies and the tourism and hospitality sector in Uganda lack staff who communicate in fluent French and know French culture or the cultures of other French-speaking countries, and therefore cannot compete favorably in the global market.

1.3 Methodology

The study was conducted in the entire Uganda. In order to determine the importance of knowledge of the French language and culture for companies and the tourism and hospitality sector in Uganda wishing to enter the French-speaking market. A survey consisting of seventeen questions was administered to 25 companies, including 11 companies with less than 10 employees (because some companies have fewer employers such as family owned business or tour companies), and 25 tourism and hospitality sector businesses with between 10 and 50 employees. Semi-structured interviews were conducted as well. In order to establish the extent to which multilingualism provides a competitive edge in today's job market, the present study focused on four issues:

Table 1: Interview Questions.

- In which department do you think language skills are needed? - Other than English, what language do you consider essential for success in business? - What are the main obstacles for Ugandan business to enter the French speaking market? - Suggest any 5 ways in which Ugandan business and Tourism companies can undertake to combat the above obstacles in order to enter the French speaking market.

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Preliminary findings indicated that, in order to build fairer, more sustainable, more solid international trade with the French-speaking market, French language must become an essential part of Uganda's strategic plan.

2 Review of Literature

The emerging studies about challenges facing Uganda's trade and tourism sector to enter the French speaking market are none existent. Evidence suggests that there is a trade imbalance between Uganda and France (see New Vision July 16 2022) and that many are the business that fail due to linguistic and cultural barrier (Atcero 2015). Scholarly evidence indicates that France which is the world's leading tour destination, with over 80 million visitors per year, is also one of the largest tourism markets in the world, with an estimated 1.6 million French visiting African countries each year. However, only 15,000 of these come to Uganda, compared to the 60,000 arrivals from the United Kingdom. This is largely attributed to the language barrier. This is further essentially attributed to the fact that tourism today is highly promoted over digital platforms and the amount of online content about Uganda that exists in the French language will be a bigger determinant of how Uganda will grab the attention of the French speaking world to visit Uganda. To date, Uganda's potential to maximize marketing investment by developing a strong brand narrative and a digital strategy for content marketing in the French Language is still facing obstacles. All professional tour operators need qualified translators, who are essential in the tourism and hospitality sector. Hotel and restaurant owners, travel agents, tour operators and tourist guides, all require content in multiple languages to service their client's needs. The language is indeed an issue in hotel reviews, but to varying degrees according to the language group of tourists. By eliminating language barriers and cultural misunderstandings, the companies can also reach their target customers with effective marketing in their native language. In tourism, however, better language skills mean better quality of service.

According to Kramsch (2020), language is not simply a tool for communication: symbolic power struggles underlie any speech act, discourse move, or verbal interaction, be it in face-to-face conversations, online tweets or political debates. She argues that language is clearly split into three sections: the power of symbolic representation, the power of symbolic action and the power to create symbolic reality. She draws upon a wide range of existing work by philosophers, sociolinguists, sociologists and applied linguists, and includes current real-world examples, to provide a fresh insight into a topic that is of particular significance and interest in the current political climate (socioeconomic climate, our addition) and in our increasingly digital age. She argues for the workings of language as symbolic power in educational, social, cultural and political (trade and tourism, our addition) settings. Research has also indicated that globalization and e-commerce pose new challenges and provide new competitive opportunities, especially for small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (trade companies and tourism and hospitality industries, our addition) seeking to broaden their involvement into new international markets (Heller 2003). Kramsch further argues that SMEs are only beginning to embrace these new opportunities (2020).

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Over the years, scholars have also argued that multilingualism may bring a variety of economic benefits for both individuals and communities (e.g. Grin *et al.* 2010). Gabrielle Hogan-Brun, a British scholar specializing in the interplay between language and economics, stands firmly in this camp. In her book about multilingualism, Hogan-Brun provides a vivid and generally optimistic account of the economic incentives of multilingualism for governments, organizations, and individuals. In a study undertaken by Mathatha (2016) entitled "Situational and Needs Assessment Study on the Use of French in the Hospitality Industry in Zambia with Specific Reference to Selected Hotels and Lodges in Livingstone", the author underscored the need for foreign language skills in economic sectors, in general, and the hospitality industry, in particular. She claimed that skills in the language of another country are vital when communicating with people of that country. Her findings justified a felt need for knowledge of French in the industry. According to the UBOS in surveys, employers commented that university graduates lack basic technical, managerial, and communications skills. Scholars have also argued that Language Management deserves increased attention from business managers since language management may contribute to their firms' competitive advantage (Gundersen, 2009). The importance of language management in multinational companies has never been greater than today (Feel et al 2003). Multinationals are becoming ever more conscious of the importance of global coordination as a source of competitive advantage, and language remains the ultimate barrier to aspirations of international harmonisation (ibid).

In the case of the present research in Uganda, instances where French is used in the commercial, tourism and hospitality industry were identified and the researchers were able to establish that French language skills were essential if the country chooses to access French and Francophone markets and gain a competitive advantage in the trade, tourism and hospitality industry. During a period when Uganda engages with Francophone African countries (DRC, Burundi and Rwanda) and other French-speaking countries such as France, Belgium, etc., the socioeconomic importance of the French language becomes even more significant. Further still, the interest shown by French companies to invest in Uganda and the recent visit of the French External Trade and Investment Minister Riester, rooting for win-win long-term sustainable trade in Uganda (https://theinformerug.com) has linguistic and cultural implications for a non-Francophone country like Uganda. The minister's Ugandan business counterpart, Patrick Bitature, indicated that Uganda as a country was delighted at the visit of the French External Trade and Investment Minister to Uganda and that he hoped this was the beginning of France's business relationship with Uganda. He added that the presence of the French External Trade and Investment Minister showed that the door was beginning to open for businesses.

On another note, the Council of Ministers in the EAC has agreed to consider French as a third official language to be used within the East African Community after English and Kiswahili. The decision was made under Article 137 of the proposed Amendment of the official languages of the Community during the 41st meeting of the Ordinary Council of Ministers held in Arusha, Tanzania at the East African Community Headquarters from 22 to 29 November 2021. The Council of Ministers is the policy-making organ of the EAC charged with, among others, the responsibility of keeping under

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constant review program and activity implementation. Rebecca Kadaga Alitwala, the 1st Deputy Prime Minister and also Minister of East African Community Affairs on Thursday,16 November 2021, told journalists in Kampala that the introduction of French as an official language brings various benefits to the country that will include job opportunities. During the same meeting (ibid), the Council also endorsed the application of the Democratic Republic of the Congo to join the East African Community. Currently, French is widely spoken in the DRC and neighboring Rwanda and Burundi. While presenting a ministerial paper to Parliament on the admission of DRC into the EAC, Kadaga said that DR Congo being a dominantly French-speaking country, the move will open up the use of French in the Community. The latter resonates with our objective and hypotheses stated earlier in this study. We argue that, once the relations between the French-speaking investors and Uganda are strengthened, the duo shall be able to do a lot of business together, among which agribusiness, tourism and health. The new economy is bound up with transformations of language and identity in many different ways Bauman (1997), Castells (2000) and Giddens (1990). In a similar study undertaken by Petrashevskaya & Ivanovskaya (2017), they highlighted the importance of a foreign language, especially an influential one, as a method of communication in the hospitality industry. Their study further noted the role of foreign languages in global hospitality management and in the delivery of quality services. It put an emphasis on the issues of foreign language skills. According to Mathatha (2016) as a result, French-speaking guides are hired as a way of resolving this problem, yet this has its own challenges of being costly and putting Zambians (in our case, Ugandans) who cannot speak French at a disadvantage because they miss the opportunity of being employed as tour guides for French-speaking tourists. Although French lessons for hotel staff are arranged as a way of reducing the language barrier, communication difficulties remain prevalent. Furthermore, French-speaking tourists who visit Zambia (or Uganda in our case) confirmed the fact that they experienced language and culture barriers during their stay. In today's globalized economy, distance no longer plays an important role, competition has become more severe so that only companies which have developed better international management strategies to enter the foreign markets can survive (Mayrhofer & Urban, 2011). Companies should identify the foreign markets and then define their strategy to conquer such markets. They need to find the best sales, distribution, logistics channels and learn more about the cultural environment (Lemaire, 2013). In addition, everything related to marketing, sales and after-sales service requires communication work that involves language (Grin, 2013) to varying degrees. According to Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (2005), communication is "a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs or behaviour". This can be through written and verbal. According to Shrivastava (2012), competency in verbal communication is highly essential to excel in any managerial position. Communication with customers is as important as communication with suppliers or other organizational networks, because customers both local and foreign are the main factor in determining the profits and benefits available for the business. Foreign language skills from the managers' point of view is very important to their business administration, especially for communication with customers, other companies, suppliers and other stakeholders.

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3 Procedures

As mentioned earlier, the semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to establish the extent to which multilingualism provides a competitive edge in today's job market to Ugandans. As highlighted above, the linguistic and cultural barriers in Uganda meant Uganda's trade and tourism sector would encounter obstacles in entering the French-speaking market hence trade imbalances and failure to sustain growth during the Covid-19 pandemic and digital era. The interviews were therefore conducted with the aim of understanding the main obstacles for Ugandan business to enter the French speaking market and to establish the department in which language skills are needed. The interviews further helped to understand possible ways in which Ugandan business and Tourism companies can combat the above obstacles in order to enter the French speaking market. The interview data was subjected to thematic analysis, a common method used in qualitative analysis (see Braun & Clarke; Bryman & Bell, 2011). The approach used in this study followed closely from Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79) who describe thematic analysis as a 'method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns or themes within data and for minimally organizing and describing data in rich detail'. Themes were identified due to their prevalence within the data, as well as their potential in explaining contextual issues relevant to the role of language in enabling Trade and Tourism between Uganda and France.

4 Results and discussions

4.1 Introduction

The results section presents a summary of key findings from interviews with convenient sample of Ugandans from diverse regions in different companies and hotels. Four main themes are covered within table 2,3 and 4 as a basis to demonstrate the French language and cultural gaps in accessing the French market by Ugandan Trade and Tour companies. The first theme addresses the important departments where language skills are required for Communication which is very vital. The second theme focuses on possible languages considered essential for success in business. The third theme focuses on main obstacles for Ugandan business and Tourism companies to enter the French speaking market more so during the covid-19 crisis and digital era. The last theme highlights ways in which Ugandan business and tourism companies can combat existing obstacles in order to enter the French-speaking market

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Tourism companies	Trade companies
Tour guiding	Finance and accounts
Sales and marketing	Retailer department
Communication	Security
Front office department	Business sector
Food and beverages	Education sector
Marketing and reservations	Academic department
House keeping	Field department
Top management (operations manager)	Operations department
Reception Restaurant	Administration department
Health club Dining/Bar	Sales and marketing
Tourism sector	Communication
Kitchen Hotel department	Front office department
Tour and travel department	Marketing
Travel Industry (Flight services)	Public Relations
Travel service management	Delivery
Leisure services department	Repair and maintenance
	Customer care service department

Table 2: The most important departments in which language skills are needed.

The above table summarized empirical data in the first and second columns where respondents' views can be found. Data is organized to show the most important departments in which language skills are needed.

The second theme focuses on possible languages considered essential for success in business as highlighted in the table below.

Table 3: Other than English, what language do you consider essential for success in business during covid-19 pandemic and in the digital era? (You can specify multiple languages).

Swahili (spoken by most East African Countries)
French
German
Portuguese
Japanese
Spanish
Turkish
Arabic (is also used in Sudan and Arab world)
Chinese
Luganda (not foreign language)
Russian
Dutch
Ugandan languages

The above table summarized empirical data where respondents' views can be found about language considered essential for success in business during covid-19 pandemic.

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The empirical date implies that communication with customers is as important as communication with suppliers or other organizational networks, because customers both local and foreign are the main factors in determining the profits and benefits available for the business. Foreign language skills from the managers' point of view is very important to their business administration, especially for communication with customers, other companies, suppliers and other stakeholders.

Table 4 below illustrates the main obstacles for Ugandan business and Tourism companies to enter the French speaking market more so during the covid-19 crisis and digital era.

Table 4: The main obstacles for Ugandan business and Tourism companies to enter the French speaking market more so during the covid-19 crisis.

-There is less interaction between Uganda and the Francophone world	-Language barrier
-Difficulty for Ugandans to enter the Francophone countries	-Costly in terms of learning
-Limited trade between Uganda and the Francophone countries	-Ignorance of people
-No clear relationship or partnerships between Francophone countries and Uganda	-Lockdown which limits travel
-Restrictions especially those that have come because of Covid-19	-French isn't fully part of the syllabus in schools
-Uganda has less or no direct business relationships with French speaking countries	-Communication
-Also, Uganda receives almost 1% of French tourists in a year which is very small compared to other Francophone nationalities	-Inadequate finances
-Political instability in some French-speaking countries	-Quality in terms of production
-Some hostile cultures/tribes	-Branding and packaging
-Fear of contracting Covid-19	-Inadequate skills
-Most of our clients' income was affected by Covid-19 so they ended up not travelling	-Restricted movements
-Tough standard operating procedures	Uncomfortable Covid-19 regulations
-Limited international relations Low standards to meet the quality product standards	-High transport costs as Uganda is landlocked /Bad roads
-Communication gap -Ban on travel	-Tourism facilities are not up-to-date to international standards
- no movement due to Covid-19	- Healthcare facilities are poor
	-Colonialism: the British tend to make us love English
	-Poor service delivery by some French-speaking guides in Uganda and some service providers
	-Inadequate French-speaking professionals/staff
	-Few opportunities (ignorance on available opportunities)

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-Bad marketing – poor or no funds directed to French tourists

-Wars - Rwanda genocide accredited to French army

-Because the education system is still far behind.

-The education system doesn't put emphasis on details and requirements that are important aspects in the French-speaking market.

-Limited marketing to French-speaking countries

-Stiff competition from French-speaking countries

-Limited information regarding French

-Limited marketing from tourism government bodies in French-speaking territories

-Offer an online security platform to book travel in Uganda

-Offer a premium service (prices are still a little high and the services are not always following)

-Low funding (limited funding) from the government to support marketing in French-speaking countries

The last theme highlights ways in which Ugandan business and tourism companies can combat existing obstacles in order to enter the French-speaking market

Table 5: Ways in which Ugandan business and tourism companies can combat existing obstacles in order to enter the French-speaking market.

- Uganda Tourism Board together with the French Embassy should create links between Uganda and Francophone tour operators which will create relationships
- Promote tourism products in the Francophone world
- Create a body that regulates business relationships between the tourism industry in Uganda and Francophone countries
- Make travelling easier for tour operators to Francophone countries
- Create partnerships
- Hold annual exhibitions
- Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities should encourage skilled promotion to market attractions in both the French and Ugandan community
- Promote tourism activities of both countries
- Promote Ugandan products and services to the French-speaking countries
- Encourage trade fairs and exhibitions, for instance hold a French exhibition in Uganda to attract market and exposure
- Tour companies and trade companies should organize frequent seminars to teach their personnel the French Language
- The French Embassy should set up education centers with teaching materials
- Adding French as a compulsory language in the syllabus
- Training of more professionals

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- The Education sector should roll out curriculum which embraces French
- Free visas to attract French tourists
- Cultural exchanges between France and Uganda
- Adopt French culinary skills/cooking/hospitality
- The only way is to start teaching French language to all Ugandans and make them love speaking several languages
- Companies should engage more in French lessons (French should be emphasized in schools) to solve the problem of the language barrier and to ease communication
- Transparency and accountability should be observed in order to limit corruption
- Uganda government should improve on infrastructure and resources in order to increase efficiency in service delivery
- Train in a number of international languages
- Companies in Uganda require a lot of in-house training to develop the necessary French language skills to venture into French-speaking market
- Companies should invest in their employees to remain competitive to make money and profits while in the French-speaking market
- Extensive marketing to French-speaking countries
- Training of French tourist guides and service providers
- Partnering with French-speaking countries
- Introduction of French in lower primary schools
- Train more teachers of French
- Emphasize French language in schools, especially in tourism institutions
- Invite tour operators from French-speaking countries to explore Uganda
- Training (hospitality /French, etc.)
- Support from the Ministry of Tourism

Conclusion

In conclusion, we note that the French language needs to become an essential part of Uganda's strategic plan. We argue that the French language is required for effective participation in regionalism and internationalism because research shows that multilingualism provides a competitive edge in today's job market.

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