

Progress. While students bring energy and aspiration in French education, teachers and school leaders provide a longer view of how language learning has evolved over time.

BY PROMISE TWINAMUKYE

For many students in northern Uganda, especially those near the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo, learning French is not an abstract academic exercise but a lived necessity shaped by daily interaction, trade and aspiration.

And with Uganda eyeing East African Community integration and events like Afcon 2027, French, Kiswahili, Arabic, even Chinese will more than ever need to be integrated across sciences and humanities.

For now, students near the border are leaning more into French and Kiswahili as trade languages, with hopes of promises beyond.

"I study languages because they create opportunities, especially in business and communication. You do not want to be left behind," said Denis Okerwoth, a senior four student at Nebbi Town Secondary School, Nebbi.

His classmate adds that French has made a difference in their family shop, close to the border. It used to be hard to understand what customers were saying, but business is now easier.

At St Mary's Ediofe Girls Secondary School in Arua, Senior One student, Belta Omale dreams bigger.

"I really like French, and I also want to learn Chinese, Arabic, and others. I want to explore the world, achieve things, and support my family like my father, who learned French through Red Cross work," Omale said.

"In DR Congo, French opens doors. So it is not just for school, it is becoming global."

Senior One student, Lona Asante from the same school, chose French after orientation.

"My mother speaks Kiswahili fluently, so I built on that. Just the word 'bonjour' hooked me to French and the teacher explained worldwide opportunities like

How French learning is evolving in schools



French students listen to visitors from Alliance Francaise de Kampala earlier this month. PHOTO/PROMISE TWINAMUKYE

working in Paris. Now I introduce myself confidently" Asante said.

Lessons from the staffroom

While students bring energy and aspiration, teachers and school leaders provide a longer view of how language learning has evolved over time and what challenges remain.

At one secondary school, deputy headteacher of at Vurra secondary school in Arua Alice Alesi, recalls how her own interest in French began, after admiration from a fellow student, who had learned the language in Congo and spoke it with fluency and confidence.

She remembers being struck by how the student carried herself and how naturally she communicated, yet French was not offered in her school, so the opportunity passed her by.

Years later, when the subject was introduced in school, she deliberately encouraged her children and niece to study it, convinced of its potential to open international doors.

Her niece, who studied French all the

way from Senior One to Senior Six went on to university, excelled academically and was selected for a short programme

THE ROAD AHEAD

Despite the progress made, challenges remain.

According to Sr Josephine Aciro Acan, the Headteacher at St Mary's Ediofe Girls' SS in Arua, the new curriculum requires students to make subject choices earlier than before. This often happens without sufficient exposure to all options, which can lead to confusion and misplaced decisions. "Teacher shortages, limited resources and competition from other subjects further complicate the picture, particularly in rural and under-resourced schools," Sr Acan adds.

in Paris. That experience marked a turning point, leading to a career that involves working across African countries, particularly in Francophone regions.

Evolution of teaching languages

French professor Milburga Atcero of Makerere University Business School, who has taught French since 2000, recalls how French teaching has evolved.

"Early methods were grammar-heavy, teacher-centered, involving students memorizing conjugations and losing interest," She recalls.

"Now it is competence-based, action-oriented.

We simulate real life, including, students role-playing as journalists or market sellers. Groups creating menus, and dialogues that teachers facilitate among other methods. This builds confidence for hospitality, trade, and health, beyond exams."

Complementing this, Karim Chwiny'ay, Head of Courses, Alliance Francaise de Kampala, a non profit association in Uganda, said that after books like Pierre

et Seydou, came books like On y va, but much of that content was influenced by West Africa, so even the characters and contexts reflected that region.

"Today language teaching is based on what we call l'approche actionnelle (the action-oriented approach). Students are no longer just repeating content, they are actively using the language," Chwiny'ay said.

The learners take on a bigger role. They are expected to search for information, to be creative, and to work on projects. The idea is that language is something one does, not just something one studies.

This mirrors the lower secondary curriculum's push since 2020. Kiswahili compulsory in S1-S2, French elective with projects, role-plays, and themes like greetings or global issues.

Textbooks like Pierre et Seydou paved the way for oral skills, as well as today's methods, which add AI songs and group tasks for engagement.

Inside the language classroom

In Arua, French teacher Scovia Von offers a glimpse into how language teaching itself is changing under the new curriculum. In a recent lesson on numbers, she moved beyond traditional chalk-and-talk methods, using audio recordings, songs and online resources to immerse students in authentic pronunciation and listening practice.

"I began by playing a song featuring numbers, allowing students to listen and familiarise themselves with the sounds before introducing visual and written forms," she said.

Her classes, which can have up to 43 students, reflect both the opportunities and challenges of the new curriculum, where subject choice has expanded but competition from other subjects like ICT has reduced uptake in languages.

"To address this, the school has introduced subject clustering, ensuring that students choose at least one language, a practical intervention aimed at preserving language learning in an increasingly crowded curriculum," she said.

According to Chwiny'ay, institutions like the National Curriculum Development Centre, are looking to create new teaching materials that are aligned with this approach - the new curriculum.

"You cannot use old content with a new methodology. That is why there is a push to develop new books that reflect both the competency-based curriculum and the action-oriented method of teaching," he says.