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Advocating for English as an Official Language in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

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Abstract

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the second largest and the third most populous African country, During the colonial era French was taught to serve as the official language throughout the country and as an international medium of communication, as well as the language of instruction in secondary school and in tertiary education.

Purpose: In an increasingly globalized world, the role of major languages like French and English has become pivotal in shaping cultural and economic interactions. This reflection article examines the current trends impacting the usage of these two languages while assessing their practical usefulness on both international and local scales for the DRC

Methodology: The article mainly uses secondary sources reflecting a literature review approach. By analyzing scholarly literature, this piece explores the implications of language trends for the country's future language *policy*

Findings: As the French language experiences a decline on the global stage, the rise of English as the predominant language of the 21st century presents a compelling case for linguistic reform in the DRC. The author urges the DRC, one of the largest Francophone countries, to make the strategic choice of adopting English as its main official language. Supporting arguments include the rapid decline of French as an international language, while English has imposed itself as the language franca of the 21st century used in international trade and travel, in scientific research and training, in information and communication technology, and as the overall national development language.

Conclusion: A policy reform that adopts English as an official language constitutes a necessity.

Keywords

Globalization, transformationalist perspective, French as a declining language, English as an international language (EIL), official language, lingua franca, language policy reform, DRC strategic national development,

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Introduction

The Democratic Republic of Congo, a nation with a diverse linguistic and cultural heritage, stands at a crossroads regarding its official language policy. The rise of English as the predominant language of the 21st century presents a compelling case for linguistic reform. Embracing English as an official language alongside or instead of French can enhance the DRC's participation in international trade, scientific research, information technology, and overall international development.

The DRC, with an estimated population of 100 million in 2025, is the second-largest country in Africa, the third most populous country in Africa, and the most populous country of the OIF (International Francophone Organization) outside of France itself. Endowed with a cultural diversity of more than 400 tribal languages, the country uses French as its main official language in addition to four other national languages (Kikongo, Lingala, Swahili, and Tshiluba). The latter are used as a lingua franca in four linguistic areas of the country.

Under colonial rule, French was to be taught to a small elite who could attend secondary school and the university and were destined to serve as administrative clerks and liaison agents between the colonial masters and the indigenous masses. During that period, speaking French provided a special status to the speaker as an "*évolué*," or it secured a right to access good-paying jobs within the public administration or the private sector. In contrast, not speaking French meant remaining excluded from the white-collar labor market. At best, it meant performing manual work that only required mere physical force rather than intellectual abilities. No wonder, then, speaking good French was considered a symbol of high social status. However, that is no longer the case. The adoption of English as an official language could significantly enhance DRC's global engagement and economic, scientific, and geopolitical prospects amidst the realities of globalization.

Purpose

This paper argues for the DRC to adopt English as its official language by demonstrating that French is in decline, while English is gaining ground in various areas, including the economic, academic, scientific, and geostrategic spheres, among others.

Methodology

This article is based not on primary data collection but rather on secondary sources. It is a reflective analysis of scholarly literature. Through a focused literature review, the article attempts to make the case for a language policy reform.

Theoretical Framework

Using the transformationalist framework, the paper situates English as an International language (EIL) within the broader context of globalization. From a transformational viewpoint, EIL appears as a paradigm closely connected to global dynamics. Like many social science concepts, globalization has been defined in various ways by scholars. To clarify these definitions and emphasize their nuances, we turn to several scholarly interpretations.

To demonstrate this variety, [Steger \(2003\)](#) identifies five different definitions before proposing his own as "a multidimensional set of social processes that create, multiply, stretch, and intensify worldwide social interdependencies and exchanges while at the same time fostering in people a growing awareness of deepening connections between the local and the distant (p.13). Although [Robinson \(2007, pp. 126-127\)](#) noted that there is no consensus on the meaning of globalization, he identified several points that have broader agreement. These include the growing connectivity between people and countries worldwide, an increased awareness of these linkages, and the wide-ranging effects—economic, social, political, cultural, and ideological—that stem from such processes. ([Dash, 2022, p.10](#)) echoes the same idea: "Globalization is the process of interaction and integration among people, companies, and governments worldwide."

No matter which definition is used, social scientists have developed a framework based on three perspectives to understand better the globalization phenomenon: (i) hyperglobalist, which claims that the nation-state has disappeared because nations have become borderless; (ii) sceptic, which believes that globalization is one among many movements in history; and (iii) transformationalist, which views globalization as the primary driver of current social, political, and economic changes. From this perspective, globalization is seen as a "compelling force affecting fundamental socio-political change" ([O'Neill & Chapman, 2015, p.3](#)); it is a force that transforms societies, borders, and power structures. This perspective reinforces our theoretical framework, which also emphasizes the role of English within the context of globalization. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, mastering a lingua franca that bridges cultural, linguistic, scientific, political, and economic divides is becoming increasingly essential. There is little doubt that English has become a global language ([Crystal, 2013](#)), serving as a global lingua franca ([Seidlhofer, 2005](#)). Following [Dewi \(2013\)](#), who argues that the English language (EL) and globalization seem to reinforce each other, we see EIL as a catalyst that has helped strengthen globalization while also being influenced by it. Therefore, we argue

that mastering English at both individual and national levels is crucial for success in the context of globalization (viewed through a transformationalist lens) in the 21st century. Understanding the role of English through the lens of the transformationalist perspective, as articulated by O'Neill and Chapman (2015), provides a productive framework for examining the proposed language policy change in the DRC.

1. French is Declining While English is Rising

The second half of the 20th century witnessed the French language progressively lose its influence; meanwhile, English became the dominant language around the world. To keep influence on the international arena and to promote the use of French internationally, France founded the “*Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie*” (OIF) in 1970. Aiming to promote the French language and culture, the organization encompasses 88 members. Of these, 61% (or 54 countries) are full members, seven are associate members, and the remaining 27 are observer members. One would be hard-pressed to imagine that some of the so-called full members have much to do with the French language. Take Cambodia, Vietnam, and Egypt, for example. How many people speak French on the streets of Hanoi, Phnom Penh, or Cairo?

The decline of the French language constitutes an alarming reality that even its proponents have come to deplore. In countries around the globe where French was once prominent, it has been losing ground. According to Suresh (2024, para 7), when President Macron declared that French is a “nation larger than France, part of his motivation was to counter the growing spread of English in Francophone countries.”

Bouhours (2022, para 2) reports that at the 18th Francophonie summit held in Tunisia, the French President, Emmanuel Macron, recognized the reality of the decline of French in the following terms: “French is the fifth most spoken language on earth... 80% of its speakers use that language daily. Is that a satisfactory outcome? Unfortunately, not. French is declining not only in Europe but also in Maghreb and sub-Saharan African countries.”

The same observation was echoed in Quebec. Boissinot (2022, para 2) writes that during the inaugural speech of the 43rd legislature, Quebec’s prime minister, François Legault, observed; “In terms of identity, the objective is to stop the decline of French in Quebec squarely, and in particular in Montreal—because French is the basis of our identity as a nation in particular—and it must become an imperative duty.”

Activist Pierre Lincourt (2023, para 2-4) lamented in the following terms: “Experts agree: French is in decline even in Quebec. All the indicators point in this direction.... Every day, I observe the increasing use of English among our stars, who still earn their living speaking French.”

In its 2024 report, the *Office Québécois de la Langue Française* (OQLF) on the evolution of the linguistic situation in Quebec remarked that people aged 18 to 34 are proportionally more numerous than the previous generation to know English, and the majority among them prefer using English to publish on social media or to shop online. That report also mentions that the proportion of young people working mostly (at least 90% of working time) in French has declined from 64% in 2010 to about 58% in 2023 (Office Québécois de la Langue Française, 2024). According to “Statistique Canada” (2018), the percentage of French-speaking Quebec kindergarten children dropped from 92% in 1991 to 74.7% in 2021, a total of 18 percentage points in 30 years!

In Europe, the French language is not faring any better: the dominance of English over French has been evident. In 2012, Hugues Beaudouin, a French correspondent at the European Union, provocatively titled one of his articles as a question in the following terms: “EU: French, a second-class language in the face of the dictatorship of English?” (Beaudouin, 2012). Later in 2020, Dave Keating observed that despite the UK’s departure from the EU through BREXIT, English has remained the most spoken language (Keating, 2020).

It is estimated that whereas nearly half of Europeans (47%) speak English as a foreign or second language, only 11% can do so regarding French (European Commission, 2024). Tomiwa (2023, para 3) expresses the dominance of English in Europe as follows: “The role played in the past as the lingua franca of Europe has been replaced today by English. If two Europeans meet ...and they don’t speak the same native language, they will probably talk to each other in English.”

According to Simon & Simon International (2023, para. 3) “Approximately 20% of the world’s population speaks English, with around 400 million people speaking it natively and an additional 1.5 billion who speak it as their second or foreign language.”

Africa is the continent that harbors the most francophone countries, thanks primarily to French colonization. But even there, the French language is experiencing serious setbacks. Although Francophone Africa continues to show growth, the global increase of less than 10% in the past 50 years suggests that French’s spread is marginal when compared to English, whose global adoption has accelerated due to technological advancements and sociocultural shifts. Many African countries have adopted English as either a second language or their official language. Others have adopted a policy that introduces English as a medium of instruction. Let us briefly examine the situation in some of these countries. Among the full 54 member countries of OIF, 26 (nearly 50%) are African countries. However, some of these

countries are shying away from France's overwhelming influence. In the 2023 referendum, the people of Mali opted to drop French as the official language but to keep it as a working language. Niger and Burkina Faso have followed suit.

Algeria, once a close ally of France and a user of the French language, has come to understand that it is critically important to switch to English. Convinced that English will help its citizens connect globally, the government of Algeria crafted a strategy of introducing English in its educational system: as a starting point, the plan targets the tertiary and the primary school levels; hence, first-year students in medicine and in science will be taught in English as of September 2025; meanwhile, the switch to English takes place in primary schools starting with third-year students (Sawahel, 2025).

The most telling case is that of Rwanda, a former Belgian colony that used French as its official language. Under the leadership of President Paul Kagame, who had an Anglophone background, the country adopted English as its official language in 2008. Rwanda subsequently joined the East African Community and the Commonwealth. Today, even though French is still considered one of the official languages of the country, English is fast taking precedence. It is now considered an Anglophone country, although it has not completely cut ties with the French language. As Kayigema and Mutasa (2017, pp. 102, 106) wrote: "English is gaining more influence over French... People listen to news broadcasts, watch TV programs, and read newspapers in English ... because of their positive attitude towards that language."

Although French remains the predominant official language of the DRC, the rise of English cannot be ignored and may shift the linguistic landscape. As Matabishi (2008, p. 447) points out, "In Eastern DR Congo, French is threatened by English due to frequent contacts with Anglophone countries." Kasanga (2019) reports that in a small section of Lubumbashi (the second largest city of the DRC), more than 40% of commercial advertisements are in English. The participants of a study by Cirhuza, (2024) recommended teaching English starting from primary school to bring it on par with French.

2. English is the Language of International Trade and Travel

That English has imposed itself as the *lingua franca* of global business and of international travel is not an overstatement. It is the language that best facilitates communication, collaboration, and commerce across diverse cultures and continents. Basing their research on well-documented studies confirming that language barriers can reduce international trade, Hyejin and Sussman (2010) demonstrated that English is the *lingua franca* that can play a critical role in overcoming that barrier. As Chowdhury, et al., (2024), commented, "English language proficiency plays a pivotal role in facilitating communication within the realm of international trade... The prevalence of English as a *lingua franca* streamlines negotiations, contracts, and business transactions, fostering smoother interactions and reducing misunderstanding" (p.1608).

Examining some concrete and simple examples, one need not look further than the packaging of any goods shipped internationally. Even if the product is made in China, Germany, Brazil, South Korea, India, or Ethiopia, the packaging label will be written in the national language of that country **and in** English, or in English alone. Recently, Dubai in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and China have become the preferred destinations for Congolese (and other African) traders due to the numerous and diverse goods and services that their economies offer. In addition to individual traders and businesspeople, African governments and private companies have embarked on unprecedented commercial relationships with the UAE and Asian countries in general, especially China. English, **not** French, is the language that merchants in those countries use to deal with their foreign clients.

The international banking system operates in English. In the modern world of globalization, where interconnectedness among systems and institutions is essential, English has become the language of choice for communication between corporations. The "SWIFT" system, which constitutes the backbone of communication between banks to transfer funds between accounts, is an acronym that means "Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications."

"*Business Speaks English*" is the title of a thought-provoking article by Tsedal Neeley. A professor at Harvard Business School and the founder of the consulting firm "Global Matters", Neely effectively shows that companies worldwide are adopting English as the preferred language of international business. She shares an anecdote of two Paris-based French companies that were unable to close a deal with a potential customer because the customer had brought employees who didn't speak English. "It was a shocking wake-up call, and the company soon adopted an English corporate language strategy", she concludes (Neeley, 2021).

English has evolved into a crucial tool for globalization. As a widely utilized medium for international trade transactions, the knowledge of the English language by its workforce will allow the latter to participate in the global market in a more meaningful manner.

English is unquestionably the dominant language of international travel. In addition to the realm of international trade and commerce, international travel is another area where English undeniably overshadows other languages, presenting another dimension to its global imposing status. One major challenge that people traveling internationally face is communicating effectively with locals. During trips to foreign countries where English is not the official

language, travelers are likely to encounter a few people who can speak some English. At any airport around the world, signs for basic directions such as exit, gate, flight, toilet, etc. will invariably be written both in the local language and in English.

A proficient command of English will allow Congolese entrepreneurs to enhance their trading and deepen their understanding of the operations involved in global trade. Additionally, becoming fluent in English will open more opportunities for Congolese people to travel and do business worldwide.

Institutionalizing English as an official language can enable the Congo to integrate more seamlessly into global trade networks. In effect, as [Chowdry et al. \(2024, p. 1609\)](#) observed, “access to information and knowledge in the English language is not only a facilitator of international trade but also a catalyst for economic development, enabling countries to leverage global resources, expertise, and innovation for sustainable growth.”

3. English Dominates Scientific Publications and Academia

The decline of the French language is compounded by the global dominance of English in scientific publications—a domain where French is struggling to maintain its relevance. In the past, French held cultural prestige and remained an essential means of communication. However, that role has been rapidly dwindling. The dominance of English within academic and scientific communities further exacerbates the decline of French, as English continues to be the preferred medium for scholarly publications and research dissemination. “English is the primary language in science today. In the past, universities published significant research in English, and as a scientist, you had to publish everything of importance in English these days.” ([Simon and Simon, 2023, para. 24](#)).

In a 2017 article, Jean-Francois Vienne warned that “French-speaking researchers are increasingly choosing to publish their scientific articles in English.” He indicated that the results of an analysis that Vincent Larivière and Nadine Desrochers conducted in 2016 showed that in just 34 years (from 1884 to 2014), the proportion of articles published in English increased from 30% to 80% in France and in Germany ([Vienne, 2017, para 4](#)). In their article, titled “Publish in English or perish...”, [Di Bitetti and Ferreras \(2017\)](#) indicate that the articles published in English have more citations than those published in other languages. Similarly, [Imbeau and Ouimet \(2012\)](#) concluded from the results of their empirical study that « Researchers who publish primarily in French publish less and are cited less than others. The most successful researchers tend to publish in English” (p.60).

Universities worldwide face constant pressure to rank among the best, with publication in internationally recognized journals being a significant criterion for such rankings. Citing Lillis and Curry, [Batuhan \(2021\)](#) indicates that to increase visibility and to rank among the best, universities are hiring, promoting, and rewarding faculty and graduates based on the number and quality of publications. As previously discussed, the language used in those journals is primarily English. In their blog, “In the spotlight: English, the lingua franca of science,” [Briony and Wastl \(2023\)](#) report 139,644,299 as the estimated total number of research publications stored in the Dimensions database for research. Of these publications, 114,714,760 (82%) were in English. French accounted for a mere 3,117,238, i.e., 2.2%.

Adopting a policy that makes English the official language in the DRC will better enable both faculty and students of higher learning institutions to access and contribute to the international world of scientific knowledge.

4. Information Technology and Communication Operates Mostly in English

The information technology and communication (ITC) revolution that began in the second half of the 20th century has already changed the way we communicate, learn, and do business—in short, how we live. The language used by that revolution is none other than English. That was also the case with the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century, which was propelled by the English language both in England and in the United States. Currently, ITC has become indispensable in propelling scientific knowledge.

English enables people to access a vast amount of information and communicate easily with the rest of the world through the internet. Referring to W3Techs, the Internet Society Foundation reports that among the twelve most common languages on the Internet, English accounts for 55% of all websites. Spanish is the second most common language, accounting for a mere 5%, while Russian is third with 4.9%. French is a distant fifth (4.2%), trailing fourth German by 0.1 point, i.e., 4.3%. ([Internet Society Foundation, 2023](#)). It logically follows that, with the internet carrying most of the information being produced, proficiency in English has become an indispensable skill to master.

In both professional and personal contexts, the predominance of English on the internet creates an optimal environment for English speakers to access and share information globally. In contrast, proficiency in other languages, such as French, offers little comparative advantage. Proficiency in English is indispensable in information technology: companies that develop software and new programs publish them in English; as a result, English-speaking technologists can more easily keep abreast of the fast-evolving trends and tools in their fields. In 2025, the 10 most technologically advanced African countries ([Ebatamehi, 2025](#)), leading in artificial intelligence, fintech, e-commerce, and manufacturing, include primarily countries where English is the official language (Kenya, Mauritius, South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, and Rwanda) or a second language (Egypt). Only three Francophone countries (Senegal, Morocco, and Tunisia) have made it to the list.

The development and implementation of ICT policies serve as a vital basis for promoting vital sectors like economic growth, e-commerce, governance, health care, and education. Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Malawi, and Rwanda rank among the top 10 African countries that have excelled in this area. Unsurprisingly, all are Anglophone countries. However, Senegal and Burkina Faso (French-speaking countries) manage to occupy the ninth and tenth ranks, respectively (Ekanem, 2025). If the DRC is to break through and carve out a prominent place in the field of information technology, a language policy promoting English is essential.

5. DRC's Geopolitical Strategy Demands English

Adopting English as an official language bears critical political and geopolitical significance for the DRC. The country is uniquely positioned as a member state of important regional development bodies, including the East African Community (EAC) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). English as an official language would not only assist the DRC in asserting its economic and political voice within these regional organizations but also align it with other member states that utilize English as their primary communication medium. Such a shift would undoubtedly enhance DRC's power, visibility, and influence within these regional associations. Through English, the DRC would conduct its diplomatic efforts more effectively, not only in the region but also beyond it.

Furthermore, embracing English as an official language could enhance the relationships between the DRC and its neighboring countries that are already predominantly English-speaking. These include the bordering nations of Zambia, Tanzania, Rwanda, Uganda, and South Sudan. It could also help the DRC in establishing and strengthening partnerships with these and other regional organizations, as English is widely used in trade, security, and infrastructure issues that are highly relevant to the country's geopolitical position.

Endowed with a tremendous number of natural resources that remain largely untapped, the DRC must be able to negotiate with international partners to gain from such resources, primarily through trading them in the global market. Capitalizing on these advantages, the DRC should be able to establish itself as a powerhouse in economic, political, scientific, or military arenas. A shift towards effective governance and strategic policy reforms, including the adoption of English as an official language, could significantly improve the country's standing alongside leaders such as South Africa and Nigeria.

Conclusion

The case for the DRC adopting English is compelling. Reasons range from the decline of French to economic, academic, technological, and geopolitical positioning.

DRC's position in Africa and in the broader context of globalization calls for bold action in language policy. English, as the lingua franca of globalization—particularly from a transformationalist perspective—provides a compelling reason for such a decision. In today's globalized world, the benefits of adopting English as its official language are indisputable. The position of the DRC as an emerging nation aiming to play a significant role in the global economy and improve its international relations makes English even more relevant, as it is the primary mode of communication used in most international connections. English alone will arguably not propel the DRC to the powerhouse role it is supposed to play on the African scene, but it is an essential and crucial condition for the country to play that role.

Considering the foregoing discussion, adopting a clear policy of English as an official language is a strategic choice that will contribute to making the DRC a vibrant and prosperous nation in the context of 21st-century globalization and beyond. Consequently, for the DRC to fully play its role within the context of globalization, adopting English as its official language is not an option but an obligatory endeavor that requires political courage and financial, material, and human resources; it is a bold movement that must be undertaken sooner rather than later.

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