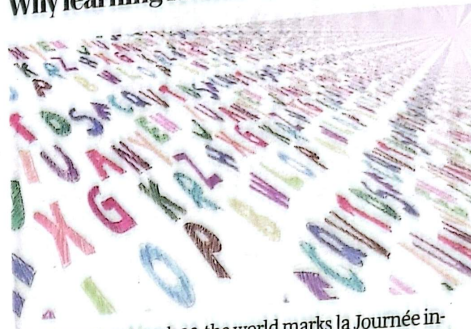


LETTERS

Why learning French matters for Uganda



Every year, on March 20, the world marks la Journée internationale de la Francophonie (Francophone Day), a celebration of the French language, cultural, and global cooperation. In Uganda, this celebration holds unique importance. For many Ugandans who attended primary and secondary school in the 1990s and early 2000s, learning French was part of the syllabus, a rite of passage in one's academic journey.

I began my French journey in primary and secondary school, awkwardly navigating the basics of *Je m'appelle* and humming along to the familiar classroom tune *Bonjour Madame, Bonsoir Monsieur*. ... At the time, none of us imagined that French would one day become a tool for diplomacy, professional growth, and cultural connection.

In 2023, I received a scholarship from the Ministry of ICT and National Guidance, in partnership with the French Embassy, to study French at Level A2 and sit for the internationally recognised DELF (Diplôme d'Études en Langue Française) examination. DELF is an internationally recognised French-language proficiency test awarded by the French ministry of Education. The experience of learning French, almost 20 years into my professional career, reinforced a truth we often overlook: language is not just spoken; it is lived. Through French, I discovered a deeper appreciation for Francophone music, film, literature, and traditions, and I see language as an entry point into a vibrant global community.

French also matters to Uganda at a strategic level, specifically in the energy sector, where I have worked for the last 15 years. One of Uganda's most significant partners in the energy sector is TotalEnergies EP Uganda, a major player whose parent company is headquartered in France. In the energy sector, French companies are investing in training, skills transfer, and capacity building for Ugandan professionals, alongside the large infrastructure projects, such as Uganda's Tilenga, Kingfisher and Eacop oil production and commercialisation projects. Strengthening Francophone competencies offers both intellectual and economic advantages.

Uganda's engagement with the Francophonie culture also reflects the continent's broader linguistic landscape. Africa is home to the largest Francophone population in the world, with more than 20 of the continent's 34+ Francophone states. In my travels across seven Francophone countries and in interactions with nationals from many more, I have seen first-hand how French serves as a bridge between diverse cultures. For a country like Uganda, which sits outside the Francophone bloc yet remains deeply connected to it, the language offers opportunities to expand diplomacy, trade, and cultural cooperation.

Beyond policy and partnerships, learning French has been personally enriching. From attending celebrations like the annual Beaujolais Nouveau Festival to attempting to engage in conversations in French, each moment has allowed me to experience the language beyond the classroom. It has deepened my understanding of how people live, celebrate, and express who they are.

I am, therefore, proud to have received the DELF diploma, and I express my renewed commitment to continuing to learn the French language and culture. Mastering a language requires continuous practice and courage (especially when nouns are male or female).

Nelson Mandela once said, "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his own language, that goes to his heart."

In a world that demands collaboration across cultures, speaking another language, especially one as globally influential as French, is an asset and an act of connection.

As Uganda deepens its ties with the Francophone world, embracing French is a meaningful investment in diplomacy, the economy, and our shared human experience.

Gloria Sebikari,
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at Petroleum Authority