INTERDISCIPLINARY FRENCH CURRICULA IN NIGERIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

French studies in Nigerian higher education have traditionally been organised as a monodisciplinary programme, with strong emphasis on teaching and limited professional diversification. In recent years, this structure has become increasingly problematic. Graduates face limited employment opportunities, declining motivation, and weak professional use of French after graduation. These challenges are further intensified by shifting educational policies, including the removal of French as a compulsory subject in the 2025 Basic and Seconday School National Curriculum. This paper examines the problems associated with monodisciplinary French curricula in Nigerian universities and assesses the prospects of adopting interdisciplinary French programmes as a sustainable alternative. Drawing on interdisciplinarity theory, human capital theory, and language policy perspectives, the study adopts a conceptual policy analysis approach grounded in interdisciplinary curriculum theory, to analyse the prospects of interdisciplinary French curricula in Nigerian higher education. The paper further reveals that French-only programmes are structurally vulnerable, narrowly focused, and poorly aligned with labour market demands. In contrast, interdisciplinary French curricula offer expanded career pathways, improved student enrolment, and stronger graduate relevance. The paper argues that combining French with fields such as education, international studies, translation, and communication enhances both academic value and employability. It concludes that curriculum reform through interdisciplinarity is essential for the sustainability of French studies in Nigerian higher education and calls for policy support from regulatory and institutional stakeholders.

Keywords: French studies, interdisciplinarity, curriculum reform, graduate employability, Nigerian higher education

1. Introduction

Language education which is the systematic process of teaching and learning a language plays a strategic role in higher education worldwide. Universities do more than teach language structures, they prepare graduates for social participation, economic relevance, and professional mobility. As a result, the organisation of language curricula has become a major concern, particularly in multilingual and developing societies where education is closely linked to employability and national development (Marginson, 2021; Young & Muller, 2023).

Concerns about graduate employability have intensified in Nigerian higher education. Employers now prioritise transferable skills, interdisciplinary competence, and practical relevance. This situation is further complicated by changes in national education policy where French is no longer compulsory at the basic and secondary levels in Nigeria (Nigerian Federal Ministry of Education, 2025). This shift has weakened the pipeline of learners entering higher education with strong French foundations. It has also reduced the perceived value of French as a stand-alone academic discipline. Studies on language policy consistently show that curriculum relevance and institutional support are essential for the survival of language programmes in changing policy environments (Bamgbose, 2021).

This paper therefore examines the problems associated with monodisciplinary French curricula in Nigerian higher education and explores the prospects of interdisciplinary alternatives. It argues that curriculum reform is no longer optional. It is a necessity for graduate relevance, programme sustainability, and policy resilience.

This study adopts a conceptual policy analysis approach grounded in interdisciplinary curriculum theory, human capital theory, and language policy perspectives. It draws its concepts on recent scholarship in applied linguistics and higher education studies. These frameworks provide a coherent lens for understanding both the challenges and the possibilities of reform.

By focusing on interdisciplinary French curricula, this study contributes to ongoing debates on language education reform in Nigeria. It also offers practical insights for curriculum planners, university administrators, and regulatory bodies. Overall, the paper seeks to reposition French studies as a dynamic, relevant, and sustainable component of Nigerian higher education.

2. **Theoretical Framework**

This study is guided by three complementary theoretical perspectives: human capital theory, interdisciplinary curriculum theory, and language policy and planning perspectives. Each framework offers insight into the challenges and prospects of French curricula in Nigerian higher education.

2.1. **Human Capital Theory**

Human capital theory views education as an investment that enhances individual productivity and economic value. Early contributions by Becker established the foundation of the theory, while recent scholars have expanded its application to higher education systems. Marginson (2021) explains that universities are increasingly evaluated based on their ability to produce employable graduates.

Applied to language education, human capital theory suggests that linguistic competence must translate into economic and professional opportunities. A curriculum that limits graduates to a narrow career path reduces the return on educational investment. In the Nigerian context, French-only programmes often fail to maximise the economic value of language skills. This study adopts human capital theory to assess how interdisciplinary French curricula can improve graduate employability and economic relevance.

2.1. **Interdisciplinary Curriculum Theory**

Interdisciplinary curriculum theory argues that meaningful learning occurs when knowledge from different disciplines is integrated to address real world problems. Repko et al. (2023) emphasise that interdisciplinarity is not the random combination of subjects, but a deliberate curriculum design process. This theory challenges rigid disciplinary boundaries that restrict learning outcomes.

In language education, interdisciplinary curriculum theory supports the combination of language study with fields such as international studies, communication, translation, and tourism. Such integration allows students to apply linguistic knowledge in practical contexts. This framework is central to the present study, as it provides the conceptual basis for proposing interdisciplinary French curricula in Nigerian universities.

2.3. **Language Policy and Planning Perspectives**

Language policy and planning perspectives examine the relationship between language, education, and power. Scholars in this field argue that language programmes survive only when supported by coherent policy and relevant curriculum design. Bamgbose (2021) highlights how policy instability can weaken language education in African contexts.

Liddicoat (2023) further explains that curriculum relevance is a key factor in language sustainability. When languages are removed from compulsory education or marginalised by policy shifts, higher education programmes must adapt to remain viable. This perspective is particularly relevant to French studies in Nigeria, where policy changes have reduced the institutional status of French.

3. Structural Challenges of French Monodisciplinary Curricula and Prospects of Interdisciplinary French Curricula in Nigerian Higher Education

3.1. **Structural Rigidity and Contemporary Curriculum Challenges**

The dominance of pedagogy and teacher training in French curricula has created significant challenges. Teaching remains the primary, and sometimes the only, visible career pathway for many graduates. This narrow focus no longer reflects the realities of the contemporary labour market. Employers now seek graduates who can apply language skills in varied professional contexts.

Socio economic changes have further exposed these weaknesses. Globalisation, digital communication, and regional mobility have expanded the demand for multilingual professionals in media, diplomacy, tourism, translation, and international business. Yet many French programmes in Nigerian universities have not integrated these domains into their curricula. This gap limits the practical relevance of French studies.

The consequences are visible at the graduate level. Many students complete French degrees without clear professional direction. Some abandon the language entirely after graduation, while others move into unrelated fields where their linguistic skills are underutilised. Studies on graduate employability show that such outcomes often result from curricula that are disconnected from labour market demands (Marginson, 2021; Darvin & Norton, 2022).

Institutional vulnerability has also increased. Changes in national education policy, including the removal of French as a compulsory subject at lower levels, have reduced the pipeline of students entering university French programmes (Nigerian Federal Ministry of Education, 2025). Departments that rely solely on monodisciplinary structures struggle with declining enrolment. This pattern suggests that the problem lies not in student attitudes towards French, but in limited curriculum design.

3.2. **Prospects of Interdisciplinary French Curricula in Nigerian Higher Education**

Interdisciplinary French curricula recognise an important reality: not all students who study French want to become teachers. Many students are interested in careers in diplomacy, media, business, tourism, translation, development work, and religious or humanitarian missions.

Combined Honours and Employability Pathways

One of the strongest prospects of interdisciplinary French curricula lies in employability diversification. When French is combined with education, students who are interested in teaching still receive strong pedagogical training. However, they also gain broader academic exposure that allows them to work in educational administration, curriculum development, and international education programmes. Furthermore, there are many combinations that can help the students in their desired field such as:

- **French and Education**

French and Education remains an important combination. It supports students who are interested in teaching, curriculum development, and educational administration. Unlike French-only programmes, this combination provides both language competence and professional training in pedagogy and educational management.

Graduates of this combination can work as French teachers, curriculum officers, education consultants, and language coordinators. They can also work with educational agencies and international education programmes. This combination therefore should be encouraged because it professionalises teaching while keeping alternative education related career paths open.

- **French and International Studies**

French and International Studies is one of the most strategic combinations. It aligns language learning with diplomacy, foreign policy, and global affairs. Students gain linguistic competence alongside knowledge of international relations, political systems, and global economics.

Graduates can work in Foreign Service, embassies, international organisations, nongovernmental organisations, regional bodies, and international development agencies. They are also suited for roles in policy analysis and international cooperation. This combination positions French as a working language of international engagement rather than an academic subject.

- **French and Translation Studies**

French and Translation provides direct access to language based professions. Translation and interpreting require more than language fluency. They demand specialised training, contextual knowledge, and professional practice.

Graduates can work as translators, interpreters, language editors, subtitlers, localisation experts, and freelance language consultants. They can also work with publishing houses, media organisations, courts, and international institutions.

- **French and Mass Communication or Journalism**

French combined with Mass Communication or Journalism responds to the growing demand for multilingual media professionals. Modern media operates across borders. News, content creation, and public communication increasingly require language flexibility.

Graduates of this combination can work as journalists, broadcasters, communication officers, media analysts, public relations officers, and content creators. They are well suited for international media organisations and cross border reporting. Deuze (2021) Media studies research confirms that language skills enhance journalistic reach and credibility in global reporting.

This combination links language competence to visibility, public influence, and information dissemination.

- **French and Tourism or Hospitality Studies**

French and Tourism or Hospitality Studies connects language education with the service economy. Tourism is a global industry where language plays a critical role in customer experience, cultural mediation, and service quality.

Graduates can work as tour managers, travel consultants, hotel managers, airline staff, cultural heritage officers, and international customer service professionals. This combination transforms French into a practical tool for service delivery and international engagement.

- **French and Linguistics**

French and Linguistics supports students interested in language analysis, research, and language related professions beyond teaching. Linguistics provides analytical tools that deepen understanding of language structure, use, and variation.

Graduates can work in language research, speech technology, language documentation, lexicography, curriculum development, and language policy work. Linguistic training also supports careers in editing and language consultancy.

- **French and Religious or Mission Studies**

French combined with Religious or Mission Studies addresses the needs of faith based and humanitarian organisations. Many religious missions and development projects operate in Francophone regions of Africa.

Graduates can work as missionaries, development officers, community coordinators, translators for faith organisations, and humanitarian workers. Studies in development and mission education stress the importance of language competence for effective cross cultural engagement.

Combined honours programmes offer multiple advantages: They increase student motivation by linking studies to clear career outcomes, diversify employment opportunities and reduce graduate frustration and they also improve student enrolment and programme sustainability.

For institutions, interdisciplinary curricula encourage collaboration across departments and reduce vulnerability to policy shifts. For students, they offer flexibility, relevance, and dignity of choice.

4. **Curriculum Design and Structural Considerations**

Curriculum design is the point where educational ideas become concrete action. It determines what students learn, how they learn, and what they can do after graduation. In the case of French studies in Nigerian universities, curriculum structure remains one of the strongest barriers to relevance and employability.

4.1. **Limitations of the 70–30 Course Distribution Model**

The dominant curriculum model in most combined programmes assigns approximately seventy percent of course content to French and thirty percent to the second discipline. This structure reflects a traditional belief that language mastery must outweigh all other academic considerations. While this approach once appeared logical, it now creates significant limitations.

First, the second discipline is often underdeveloped. Students acquire surface level knowledge that is insufficient for professional practice. Studies on curriculum imbalance show that unequal disciplinary weighting weakens skills transfer and reduces graduate competitiveness (Knight, 2021; Marginson, 2020). In language programmes, this imbalance reinforces the idea that French exists mainly for classroom teaching. Second, the model limits student confidence. Graduates frequently feel unprepared

to present themselves as professionals outside education. This perception contributes to career drift and abandonment of French as a working language after graduation (Borg & Phipps, 2022).

4.2. **Toward a Balanced Interdisciplinary Structure**

A balanced interdisciplinary curriculum offers a more sustainable alternative. A fifty–fifty structure allows both disciplines to develop fully and meaningfully. French becomes a tool, not an end in itself. The second discipline becomes functional, not decorative.

Research in interdisciplinary curriculum design confirms that balanced structures enhance learning coherence and professional relevance (Repko & Szostak, 2021; Klein, 2023). Students learn to apply language within real professional contexts such as diplomacy, media, tourism, or translation. This approach aligns with contemporary views of language as social and economic capital rather than purely academic knowledge (Darvin & Norton, 2022).

Such balance also increases programme attractiveness. Evidence from curriculum reform studies shows that interdisciplinary programmes record higher enrolment and stronger student retention than monodisciplinary ones (Leask, 2020).

4.3. **Interdepartmental Collaboration and Institutional Commitment**

Effective interdisciplinary curricula require genuine collaboration between departments. French departments cannot work in isolation. Curriculum planning, teaching, and assessment must be shared responsibilities.

Scholars emphasise that successful interdisciplinary programmes depend on institutional support and collaborative teaching cultures (Spelt et al., 2021; Frodeman, 2020). Without coordination, interdisciplinarity becomes fragmented and symbolic.

Universities must therefore encourage cross departmental partnerships, recognise joint teaching efforts, and provide structural incentives for collaboration. Curriculum reform is not only a pedagogical task, it is an institutional responsibility.

4.4. **Role of the National Universities Commission**

The National Universities Commission plays a central role in curriculum regulation in Nigerian higher education. Through the Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards and the Core Curriculum and Minimum Academic Standards, the Commission defines programme structures, credit distribution, and graduation requirements.

Current standards provide limited flexibility for interdisciplinary language programmes. Although innovation is encouraged in principle, approval processes remain cautious and discipline bound. This situation discourages departments from proposing bold curriculum reforms.

A structured review of BMAS and CCMAS is therefore necessary. Such a review should explicitly recognise interdisciplinary language degrees as legitimate academic pathways. This aligns with global trends in curriculum diversification and graduate oriented education (UNESCO, 2022; OECD, 2023).

4.5. University Management and Academic Senates

University management and senates translate national policy into institutional practice. Their support determines whether interdisciplinary programmes move beyond proposal stage.

Senates should prioritise curriculum relevance alongside academic tradition. Interdisciplinary programmes should not be treated as exceptions. They should be embedded within institutional academic strategies. Research shows that universities with senate led curriculum innovation adapt more effectively to labour market change (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2019).

Through responsive regulation and institutional leadership, French studies can remain relevant, competitive, and sustainable within Nigerian higher education.

5. Conclusion and Future Directions

This study set out to examine the structural weaknesses of monodisciplinary French programmes in Nigerian higher education and to argue for interdisciplinary curriculum reform. The evidence is clear. French-only programmes no longer respond adequately to contemporary academic, professional, and policy realities.

Language education today must serve multiple functions. It must develop competence, support employability, and enable mobility. When French is taught in isolation, these goals are difficult to achieve. Graduates face limited career options, weak professional identity, and declining motivation to sustain the language after graduation. This outcome undermines both individual aspirations and national language policy objectives.

Interdisciplinary French curricula offer a viable and forward looking alternative. By combining French with complementary disciplines, universities can reposition the language as a professional tool rather than a narrow academic pursuit. Such programmes align with global shifts toward skills integration and applied knowledge in higher education (UNESCO, 2022; OECD, 2023).

Looking ahead, further empirical research is needed. Graduate employment outcomes, student perceptions, and institutional case studies would strengthen the evidence base for reform. Comparative studies across African and multilingual contexts would also deepen understanding.

The future of French in Nigerian universities depends on adaptability. Curriculum innovation is not a threat to disciplinary integrity. It is a strategy for relevance, sustainability, and growth in a rapidly changing educational landscape.

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