

Unraveling communication effects on small-scale vendors' businesses in Kigali's Ejoheza Modern Market

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Abstract

Purpose: The research aimed to understand how small-scale vendors exchange with their customers from various linguistic backgrounds. It particularly sought to explore how language proficiency influences business interactions and customer satisfaction in the Ejoheza Modern Market, Kigali.

Methods: Using a qualitative approach, the study investigated the language preferences and communication practices of small-scale vendors. Data were collected through direct observation and interviews with selected vendors to identify the main languages used in daily transactions and coping mechanisms adopted when facing language barriers.

Results: The findings revealed that all vendors can easily speak Kinyarwanda, but only a few of them can communicate in English and French. This limitation affects their interaction with non-Kinyarwanda-speaking customers, often leading to communication breakdowns. To address this challenge, vendors rely on translation applications on their phones or seek assistance from interpreters to facilitate exchanges.

Conclusion: The study concludes that language proficiency significantly influences vendors' ability to attract and serve diverse customers, which in turn affects sales and market inclusivity.

Limitations: The study was limited to Ejoheza Modern Market and did not include other markets in Kigali, which restricts the generalization of the findings.

Contribution: This study highlights the critical role of language skills in enhancing small-scale vendors' business success. It recommends establishing affordable language training programs to empower vendors, improve customer relations, and promote inclusive economic growth in Rwanda's urban markets.

Keywords: *Business Success, Communication, Official Languages, Small-Scale Vendors*

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1. Introduction

Rwanda, a country known for its rapid post-genocide recovery and socioeconomic transformation, has undergone significant political, economic, and cultural changes over the past few decades. A crucial aspect of this transformation has been the country's language policy, which has led to the establishment of three official languages: Kinyarwanda, French, and English. While Kinyarwanda is the most widely spoken language and the lingua franca of everyday life, French and English play important roles in Rwanda's formal sectors, including education, government, and international business. The coexistence of these three languages creates a dynamic linguistic environment that influences various facets of

Rwandan society, particularly in urban areas such as Kigali, the capital city, is characterized by a complex linguistic landscape where Kinyarwanda, French, English, and Swahili coexist.

Since the majority of people in Rwanda speak and understand Kinyarwanda as their mother tongue, code-switching and code-mixing are frequently employed (Habintwali, Niyibizi, & Kamanzi, 2024). Small-scale vendors, often regarded as the backbone of Rwanda's urban economy, operate in this area, selling a range of goods and services to a diverse population. These vendors interact with customers, suppliers, and other vendors from different linguistic backgrounds, navigating a multilingual landscape in which the ability to communicate effectively can significantly impact business success. Despite the importance of language in these business interactions, there has been limited research on how language proficiency, particularly in Kinyarwanda, French, and English, affects the operations and success of small-scale vendors in Rwanda's informal economy.

This study sought to fill this gap by exploring the language proficiency of small-scale vendors in the Ejoheza Modern Market and examining how their ability to speak and understand Kinyarwanda, French, and English influences their business practices. This research was motivated by the understanding that language is not merely a tool for communication but a critical factor that shapes economic opportunities and social interactions. In the context of small-scale vendors, language proficiency may impact customer relations, negotiation processes, access to markets, and business sustainability.

Effective communication is indispensable in business operations; without it, collaboration between producers, distributors, and consumers falters, leading to decreased entrepreneurial effectiveness.⁵ Mastering English, for instance, empowers us to engage confidently with international business partners, fostering connections with people worldwide (Barat & Talukder, 2023). By focusing on a market in the City of Kigali, a bustling commercial hub that attracts a mix of local customers, expatriates, and international tourists, this study aims to understand how vendors' linguistic skills affect their day-to-day operations.

This study examined whether vendors' proficiency in these three languages enables them to engage with a more diverse customer base, ultimately contributing to their business success. Conversely, the study also explored how language barriers may limit vendors' ability to thrive in an increasingly multilingual and globalized market. This study is significant because it sheds light on the interplay between language and informal business practices in Rwanda, a country at the crossroads of tradition and modernization. By examining the language practices of small-scale vendors in Kigali, this study contributes to a broader understanding of the socioeconomic role of language in shaping business opportunities and challenges in emerging economies. Ultimately, the findings of this study may have implications for policies and programs aimed at supporting small businesses and enhancing language skills in Rwanda's business environment.

2. Literature Review

This literature review examines key themes relevant to the study of language proficiency and its impact on small-scale vendors' businesses in Rwanda, specifically focusing on Kinyarwanda, French, and English languages. It draws on the literature on language use in business, multilingualism in African contexts, and socio-economic outcomes related to language skills. The review is organized around three main topics: multilingualism in Rwanda, language and business operations, **and** language proficiency and socio-economic outcomes, with the author hypothesizing that proficiency in foreign languages such as French and English with the mastery of Kinyarwanda can lead to Ejoheza Modern Market's vendors success in their businesses.

2.1 About Ejoheza Modern Market

The Ejoheza Modern market is located in the city of Kigali, a few meters away from the city's main Bus Terminal of Nyabugogo. It was constructed for former street vendors as a solution to security issues that were caused or likely to be caused by street hawking, such as public disorder. The market was held on 3rd September, 2016 (police.gov.rw, 2016). The market worth Rwf192 million was constructed by

the City of Kigali in partnership with other stakeholders, including government ministries, security organs, and the private sector (police.gov.rw, 2016). Most of the occupants in the new market, which has the capacity to sheltering 3200 traders, are women.



Figure 1. Sign post displaying the market name at the entrance
Source: Field data

2.2 Products sold in Ejoheza Modern Market

The Ejoheza Modern Market in Nyabugogo offers a diverse range of products to meet the needs of its customers. The market is organized into sections dedicated to various goods, including vegetables, fruits, cereals, clothes, shoes, and shop items. Having a variety of products in the Ejoheza Modern Market is vital for several reasons. First, it ensures that the market caters to diverse clientele with different needs. This variety fosters economic activity by supporting local farmers and traders and creating a hub for sustainable livelihoods. Additionally, the availability of multiple product categories in one location enhances convenience for shoppers, saving time and reducing transportation costs. By offering a wide range of goods, customers from all backgrounds can appreciate Rwanda's locally grown produce.





Figure 2. A cross section of some of the items sold in Ejoheza Modern Market

2.3 Multilingualism in Rwanda

According to the revised Rwandan Constitution of 2003 (amended in 2015), the three official languages are Kinyarwanda, English, and French. . Kinyarwanda, the mother tongue of the majority of the population, is deeply tied to national identity and cultural heritage. French was historically the dominant language of administration, education, and commerce following Rwanda's colonial period under

Belgian rule, while English gained prominence after the 1994 genocide, when Rwanda shifted towards an English-speaking orientation to foster closer ties with the East African Community (EAC) and the global community.

In 2008, English became the sole language of instruction from the first grade, while French and the mother tongue Kinyarwanda were taught as subjects. This policy was amended again in 2011, and Kinyarwanda became the language of instruction up to the third grade (P1-P3). Rwanda remained a member of La Francophonie and eventually became a member of the East African Community (EAC) and the Commonwealth. Currently, French, English, and Kinyarwanda are Rwanda's official languages, but English is the dominant language in education, business, and official communication (Muhawenayo, Habimana, & Heshmati, 2022). The multilingual landscape in Rwanda is complex, as vendors in Kigali and other urban centers often navigate these three languages in their business interactions. This linguistic flexibility plays a crucial role in shaping market dynamics, especially in informal sectors such as small-scale vending.

2.4 Language and Business Operations

Networking is the backbone of growth and success in business. The ability to speak multiple languages connects one to a world of increased networking opportunities, breaking down barriers that might otherwise compromise business expansion or new career opportunities. Linguistic proficiency enables better connection with a broader spectrum of peers, partners, and potential clients from various backgrounds. Communicators require linguacultural competence (LCC), defined as the ability to communicate successfully with people from various languages and cultural backgrounds (Peltonen & Hu, 2025).

In Rwanda, small-scale vendors—who often operate in informal markets—must engage with a diverse customer base that includes Rwandans from different linguistic backgrounds, expatriates, and tourists. In this context, language proficiency can influence the ability to connect with customers, negotiate prices, and create trust between the two parties. Kinyarwanda, the lingua franca of everyday interactions, often facilitates rapport building and trust with local customers. One of the best ways to connect with and retain customers is by speaking their native language. In a study of online shoppers from 29 countries on four continents, nearly 80 percent of respondents said they prefer purchasing products with information provided in their native language.

Moreover, 66 percent of the same pool of shoppers said they used automated translation to help guide them through the global marketplace, even if their confidence in their ability to read English was strong (ChatLingual, n.d.). Moreover, vendors often need to communicate with suppliers or partners in languages other than Kinyarwanda. This is especially true for imported goods, which require communication with suppliers who may prefer English or French. Thus, language proficiency or lack thereof may directly impact business efficiency, market reach, and profitability.

2.5 Language Proficiency and Socio-Economic Outcomes

The relationship between language proficiency and socioeconomic outcomes has been well documented across diverse contexts. In many African countries, including Rwanda, language skills are strongly correlated with access to education, employment, and economic progress. In addition, the type of employment tends to determine the degree of knowledge of foreign language usage. For example, Kinyarwanda speakers are found in all branches of economic activity, whereas English/French speakers are found in non-agricultural, non-manual jobs such as finance, administration, production and distribution services, real estate, and enterprise. This suggests that language proficiency and career success are factors that potentially influence each other (Vinnikainen, 2022).

However, language proficiency can act as a barrier. Vendors who are less proficient in French or English may face challenges in engaging with non-Kinyarwanda-speaking customers, limiting their market access and business growth in the long run. These language barriers may result in lower sales, decreased customer satisfaction, and fewer opportunities for networking and collaboration. Furthermore, Poor communication with clients or customers owing to language barriers can negatively impact customer

satisfaction. Misunderstood requests, unclear responses, or errors in delivering services/products can result in lost business opportunities (flacinstitute.com, n.d.).

In contrast, multilingualism can be a valuable resource. Studies have shown that vendors who are bilingual or multilingual are more likely to diversify their customer base, build relationships across linguistic communities, and tap into new economies. Researchers have found that multilingualism is beneficial to the economy. Countries that actively nurture different languages reap a range of rewards, from more successful exports to a more innovative workforce (...) Language matters on a large-scale national level and at the level of smaller businesses (Weforum, 2018). For example, in Rwanda, small-scale vendors fluent in both Kinyarwanda and English may cater to both local and international clientele, potentially increasing their profitability and market visibility.

2.6 Language, Identity, and Power in Business Contexts

In addition to its economic implications, language use in business is linked to identity and power dynamics. In post-genocide Rwanda, the use of Kinyarwanda, French, and English reflects different social identities and political allegiances. For small-scale vendors in Kigali, the choice of language in business interactions may not only reflect their linguistic proficiency but also signal their social status, educational background, and political views. With language, one can reflect on their position in society. The diversity of languages mastered by one will certainly differ from another; it is influenced by language acquisition from the environment. Therefore, people who have a high diversity of languages and can communicate well are seen as privileged in society (Rabiah, 2018).

Vendors may strategically switch between languages to align themselves with certain groups or project a particular image of professionalism, modernity, or cosmopolitanism. Furthermore, language proficiency may reflect deeper socioeconomic divides. Vendors with high proficiency in English, for instance, may be perceived as more educated or upwardly mobile, which could influence their ability to attract certain types of customers and expand their businesses. Conversely, those with limited proficiency in English or French may face discrimination or exclusion from certain business networks, reinforcing socio-economic disparities within the informal sector

3. Research Methodology

This methodology section outlines a rigorous and systematic approach to exploring the impact of proficiency in Rwanda's official languages on business success, ensuring that the findings are reliable and meaningful. The research design for this study was qualitative. This approach was chosen to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of proficiency in Rwanda's official languages on business success for Ejoheza Modern Market vendors. The qualitative component allows for an in-depth exploration of the experiences and perceptions of individuals working in the business environment. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 50 key informants, including two managers and 48 vendors running businesses in the Ejoheza Modern Market.

These interviews focused on the participants' experiences with communication in Rwanda's official languages, the challenges they faced, and the strategies they used to overcome language barriers. The data were analyzed thematically. This method encompasses coding the data to identify common themes, patterns, and insights related to communication in Rwanda's official languages and business outcomes. The analysis centered on understanding the nuances of how language proficiency affects business operations and how a lack of language mastery influences communication strategies.

4. Result and Discussion

Having been granted the greenlight by the local administration to collect data from the pilot market, the researcher visited the venue and held interviews with two market officials and 48 vendors. As disclosed by one official, the market accommodates around 1,500 active vendors, but the numbers keep changing. Moreover, the transcripts from the interviews and field notes were reviewed thoroughly to understand the context and identify recurring themes related to language proficiency and business success.

4.1 Proficiency in official languages and Business Success

According to Thitthongkam, Walsh, and Bunchapattanasakda (2011), language is very important to vendors' businesses, especially for communicating with customers. Language plays an essential role in cross-cultural communications. In recent years, there has been growing interest in the study of multilingualism in professional environments and business communication. This is primarily because well-developed communicative competencies play a key role in enhancing competitiveness in the labor market and ensuring effective management of business processes (Aimoldina & Akynova, 2025). Participants consistently underscored that they receive customers from various backgrounds, and hence, they must communicate with them to earn an income. However, as they revealed, very few vendors can communicate in languages other than Kinyarwanda. One participant said, "We usually receive customers from different linguistic backgrounds. Some speak English and French, respectively. The vast majority of our customers speak Kinyarwanda. To be frank, very few of us do not know foreign languages. We resort to sign language to communicate with customers who speak English or French."

These results indicate that the inability to communicate in English or French may limit vendors' ability to engage with a broader customer base, potentially reducing sales opportunities. Customers who struggle to communicate may abandon a purchase or experience dissatisfaction, leading to lost revenue for vendors. In contrast, the vendors' use of "sign language" to bridge the communication gap indicates a natural adaptation strategy. However, this method is not always efficient for complex transaction types. Misunderstandings can arise regarding prices, product quality, or bargaining, which may lead to frustration for both vendors and customers. Israelashvili and Fischer (2022) suggest that 'recognition of emotion from verbal and nonverbal expressions' supports more effective communication.

Moreover, it is obvious that the ability to speak a customer's language can enhance the shopping experience, fostering trust and loyalty. Customers who feel understood are more likely to return, recommend the business, and establish long-term relationships with the vendors. On a similar note, participants said that most buyers speak Kinyarwanda, and that some foreigners try to master the bargaining Kinyarwanda language despite their low level of proficiency. They added that vendors know that nothing should hinder getting money from customers. As a result, they do everything possible to woo customers into buying, irrespective of language barriers. One participant stated, "In actual fact, we struggle with understanding foreign languages such as English and French, but we cannot let a customer go in the name of not knowing the language. We are in this market to make money, so we have to use all means. Fortunately, most of our customers are Kinyarwanda speakers, and some foreigners can try the bargaining language in Kinyarwanda."

This implies that vendors' determination to secure sales despite language challenges shows how economic incentives can drive informal language learning and adaptation. In a multilingual setting like Kigali, vendors develop practical, on-the-spot strategies to facilitate transactions, proving that communication is not solely about fluency but also intent and adaptability. Moreover, the fact that some non-Kinyarwanda speakers attempt to bargain in Kinyarwanda highlights the importance of the language in business interactions. This suggests that foreigners engaging in local commerce see the value of learning essential phrases, particularly in a culturally significant practice such as bargaining. Their willingness to use the language, even at a low level, reflects the market's role as a space for informal language socialization and practice. Indeed, in multilingual trading environments, both vendors and customers frequently employ pragmatic language use and code-switching, demonstrating that communication hinges on adaptability and mutual effort rather than on perfect fluency (Peterson & Sagna, 2021).

Indeed, bargaining language tends to be repetitive and formulaic, making it easier for foreigners to pick up key phrases like "Gabanya gato" (reduce a bit) or "Ni menshi" (it's too much). Since bargaining is a cultural norm, it serves as an entry point for foreigners into practical Kinyarwanda usage, reducing the pressure for full fluency while still enabling meaningful economic interaction. On the other hand, These findings suggest that markets like Ejoheza Modern Market naturally function as multilingual spaces, but there is still room for language support strategies. Offering vendors short courses in key English and French phrases or encouraging foreigners to learn basic Kinyarwanda for commerce could

help strengthen mutual understanding. Additionally, digital translation tools and multilingual price tags can enhance communication efficiency.

Scotwork (n.d.) argues that verbal communication is important, but reading someone's intentions, feelings, and reactions through body language is also possible. Body language includes nonverbal signs, such as posture, gestures, and facial expressions, that can convey a person's genuine emotions and intentions. Negotiators can better understand the opposing party's viewpoint by observing these cues, which will aid them in navigating the negotiation process. It was revealed that most of the vendors are former street women and men who never had a chance to finish high school.

This complicates their expression in languages other than Rwandan. Similarly, one participant opined that since the government constructed a market for them, there should also be ways to help vendors improve their communicative competence in English and French: "Most of us are former street vendors, and we did not finish high school. Therefore, we do not know other languages. If only the government could organize language training sessions for us, that would be a move to salute." The argument by that vendor indicates that since most vendors are former street vendors who did not complete high school, their exposure to English and French has been minimal. This lack of formal education limits their ability to communicate in foreign languages, making them reliant on Kinyarwanda for daily transactions.

Additionally, the vendors acknowledged that the government's intervention in providing them with a structured marketplace was beneficial. However, they see a gap in the support system, specifically a lack of language training. Their requests for government-organized language programs reflect their recognition of language as a tool for economic empowerment. Offering language training would not only help vendors communicate better, but also enhance their confidence and professionalism in dealing with a diverse customer base. Similarly, Vendors with limited formal education often have minimal exposure to foreign languages, resulting in reliance on local languages for business communication. This gap highlights the necessity of structured language training programs to enhance vendors' communication skills and economic opportunities (Adams, De Silva, & Razmara, 2013).

Given such language mastery issues, implementing language training for vendors would have long-term economic benefits. By equipping them with basic English and French skills, the government could help them attract and retain more customers, potentially increasing their incomes. Such training could also position them better for future business opportunities beyond local markets. This is corroborated by Agustiana, Thamrin, and Oktoma (2024), who concluded that businesses should invest in language training to boost competitiveness and mitigate communication challenges in global operations.

While structured language classes would be ideal, other practical approaches could also be effective.

- ❖ Audio-visual learning tools: Vendors can access short, market-specific language lessons via mobile apps or radio programs.
- ❖ Peer learning groups: Vendors who know some English or French could help others learn common phrases.
- ❖ Multilingual signage: Labels and signs in English, French, and Kinyarwanda can assist both vendors and customers in overcoming communication barriers.
- ❖ Role-playing workshops: Simulating real-life vendor-customer interactions in training sessions could make learning more practical and engaging.

It is clear that this challenge is related to language policy. Therefore, the government, in collaboration with NGOs or business development agencies, should incorporate language training into broader vocational education programs for informal traders. Additionally, because Rwanda promotes English and French as official languages alongside Kinyarwanda, supporting linguistic inclusivity in commercial spaces aligns with national language policies.

Participants frequently argued that most vendors use phones to interact with their customers if the language is not easy to understand. They type prices on the phone screen and allow the customer to know price preferences by displaying the phone. In turn, the customer will also type the price deemed

fit for the product. The exercise will continue until a consensus is reached, and the product will be given in exchange for the money agreed upon using phone numbers. One participant stated, “We write desired prices on the phone, and the customer does the same until an agreement is reached. Of course, some customers may not like such a bargaining system, but that is what we usually do when we cannot understand the language”. Accordingly, in multilingual market environments, vendors often resort to using mobile phones to type and display prices during negotiations, enabling a form of communication that bypasses language barriers and facilitates mutual understanding through numerical exchange (Mendoza & Lopez, 2022).

By using their phone screens to type prices, vendors create a nonverbal, text-based system that allows for negotiation without needing fluency in a common spoken language. This method simplifies complex interactions and ensures that business transactions proceed smoothly, despite linguistic limitations. This also reflects the increasing integration of digital tools into informal economic spaces. Indeed, the phone use option has some efficiency and limitations. This method ensures clarity in price negotiations, reducing misunderstandings and misinterpretations that may arise from spoken communication.

Additionally, numbers are universally understood, making it an effective approach for dealing with customers who do not speak Kinyarwanda. Conversely, there are some limitations, as some customers may find it inconvenient, especially those who prefer traditional face-to-face verbal bargaining. It may also slow down transactions, particularly during peak business hours, when quick negotiations are necessary. Furthermore, customers unfamiliar with this method may feel alienated or frustrated. Using mobile phones to display prices during transactions helps reduce misunderstandings in multilingual contexts by providing clear, universally understood numeric information that can facilitate smoother negotiations (Kiba-Janiak, 2014).

In addition, given vendors' reliance on phones, integrating translation apps, voice-to-text tools, or multilingual price lists on their devices could further improve communication. Simple language-learning apps customized for market vendors can also help them acquire essential foreign language skills over time. Moreover, the majority of the participants expressed dissatisfaction with their inability to speak French and English, which has affected their business. The same respondent called for the establishment of language training centers at an affordable cost so that many people can learn foreign languages. One participant noted, “On a number of occasions, I lose customers because I cannot communicate with them. They go where someone can at least try to speak in their language. I’d like to solicit that affordable language centers be established to enable us to learn foreign languages.”

The ordeal, as shared by this respondent, conforms with the study by Rattan (2024), who said that to succeed in today's global market, it is crucial to master English and other languages. Vendors losing customers to competitors who can communicate in English or French is a significant concern. This suggests that multilingualism is not just a convenience but a competitive advantage in businesses. Customers prefer vendors who can engage with them comfortably, and those who lack foreign language skills are at an economic disadvantage. Indeed, the request for affordable language training centers suggests that vendors recognize the importance of multilingual communication in improving their businesses.

However, affordability is key, as many vendors come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Free or low-cost training programs tailored to business communication are the most effective solution. According to Hargie (2016), as cited in Hamkar, Bashar, and Hikmat (2024). Effective communication is a cornerstone of the business world and plays a pivotal role in interactions with customers, colleagues, and clients. It involves the exchange of information and meaning through various means such as e-mail, mobile phones, or face-to-face conversations.

Corroboratively, more participants disclosed that failure to speak French and English required an interpreter. One participant stated, “I do not know any word in French or English. Therefore, I always resort to fellows who know the languages to interpret for me. Of course, interpreters sometimes need incentives. I wish I knew foreign languages to be able to interact singlehandedly with my customers”.

The respondent is correct in saying that the only way to get in touch with customers is to seek interpretation. This is because interpreting is a vital profession that facilitates communication across languages and cultures in various fields. Interpreters play a crucial role in bridging linguistic gaps in various fields, such as diplomacy, business, healthcare, and law (swlt.ac, n.d.).

The issue of seeking interpretation support may give rise to compensation for interpreters, cutting into their profits. This adds an extra layer of financial burden, especially for those already struggling with limited incomes. Moreover, waiting for an interpreter can slow down business, leading to lost sales, especially in a fast-paced market environment where efficiency matters. Relying on others means that vendors are not in full control of their business interactions, which can be frustrating and limiting. The use of interpreters in small-scale business transactions often incurs additional costs, which can reduce the already thin profit margins for vendors with limited income. Moreover, reliance on interpreters can slow negotiations, causing delays that result in lost sales, particularly in fast-paced market environments (Li, 2023).

Similarly, the fact that vendors turn to their peers for translation shows how informal social networks function as survival strategies in multilingual settings. This also suggests that within the market, there are individuals with varying degrees of language proficiency, meaning that peer learning could be a viable solution. As vendors express a desire to communicate directly with customers, targeted language training programs could be highly effective. A practical, market-focused approach—teaching key business phrases rather than full fluency—could help vendors gain independence in their interactions with customers. learnq.co.uk (n.d.) reveals that interpreting plays a crucial role in the communication process by facilitating communication between individuals who speak different languages. Interpreting helps fill the language gap, making it easier for individuals to understand each other, build relationships, and communicate effectively.

Conversely, many participants stated that although sign language and phone use are helpful, vendors cannot use these techniques to explain their products, persuade customers to buy more, and address further customer needs. One participant said, “It’s true, sign language and phones are helping us a lot to deal with customers. However, when it comes to providing more explanations about our products or addressing needs of our customers, we fall short as we can’t express ourselves orally in English or French.” Indeed, nonverbal communication can be used as a measure of one’s self-skills. This is because the way humans talk to each other shapes one’s personality. According to Othman and Ahmad (2004), nonverbal communication is an important form of communication because it can interpret a person’s emotions, personality, purpose, and even social status. Second, nonverbal communication can increase the effectiveness of message delivery and serve as a complement to verbal communication (Ibrahim et al., 2022).

This statement signifies that sign language and mobile phone price negotiation work for simple transactions, but they do not allow for detailed product descriptions, quality assurances, or persuasive selling techniques. Moreover, verbal communication helps build rapport with customers. A friendly conversation, product recommendations, or storytelling about an item’s origin can enhance the customer experience, which is difficult to achieve using phones or gestures. Moreover, if a customer has specific concerns about a product (e.g., freshness, quality, or usage instructions), vendors who lack the necessary language skills struggle to address these concerns effectively. This can lead to lost sales and customer dissatisfaction. Indeed, this corroborates with the current technological era, which has witnessed great advancements in mobile technology. Mobile gadgets have become an integral element of daily life (Alsied, 2019). It was evident that most of the vendors’ communication strategies with their customers rotate around using sign language, typing prices in phones and using translators to understand customers’ needs

4.2 Composite reliability and Cronbach alpha

Based on the interviews, the researcher found that the most challenges facing Ejoheza Modern Market include the inability to understand what non-Kinyarwanda speakers say. For example, participants frequently highlighted that the lack of formal education made it hard for them to understand foreign

languages such as French and English. This barrier often leads to misunderstandings in business communication. These misunderstandings were predominantly reported during negotiations. Language barriers, especially among vendors with limited formal education, often impede effective communication with non-native speakers, leading to frequent misunderstandings during critical business interactions, such as price negotiations (Mutesi & Uwimana, 2021).

One situation cited by one of the participants was when a customer came speaking French, yet the vendor did not know it. The vendor used sign language, which discouraged the potential buyer, who opted to move to the next selling stand, whose owner hinted that he knew French. "I once lost a customer because I could not communicate in French. That person didn't like sign language, so he bought from a neighboring stand." To mitigate this challenge, the participants reported employing various strategies to adapt their communication styles. These include using sign language and typing prices on phones. One participant noted, "Sign language and phone use in displaying prices in figures are the leading strategies we use to interact with our non-Kinyarwanda speakers. However, these strategies are not a hundred percent effective as sometimes some customers ignore you when you start using sign language or typing prices in your phone." In many multilingual environments, vendors who lack proficiency in the languages spoken by their customers risk losing sales. Communication barriers, whether due to language differences or limited proficiency, can result in customer frustration and loss of business (Muramalla, 2019).

The attitude described above may have some merits and demerits. First, in a competitive market setting, customers have choices. If one vendor cannot communicate effectively, customers may simply go to another vendor where they feel more comfortable. Second, this dynamic disadvantages vendors who lack language skills, reinforcing the idea that multilingualism is not just a skill but a business necessity. Finally, vendors with foreign language abilities gain a competitive edge, attracting and retaining more diverse customers. This is true in any case because the capacity to interact with people inside and outside their company is a key characteristic of successful business builders (Verma, Ansari, Bagaria, & Jain, 2022).

4.3 Inner Model Test

Based on the analysis of the data provided by the participants, the researcher found that three strategies are likely to help Ejoheza Modern Market vendors improve their communication skills in both French and English. First, there is a need to train vendors. 42 out of 50 participants called for language training for all vendors to enable them to have a good command of French and English, hence giving rise to their business success. As they said, short language courses can help them boost their confidence when communicating with non-Kinyarwanda-speaking customers. One participant said, "We need to be trained in foreign languages to be able to communicate confidently with our customers, and once this is done, our businesses will undoubtedly leapfrog.

" This strong demand for language training, expressed by 42 out of 50 participants, clearly indicates that vendors recognize the link between multilingualism and business success. Their desire for short, practical language courses highlights the need for tailored, business-focused training that aligns with their work schedules and immediate communication requirements. Moreover, a second foreign language is either required or a major plus. This is a significant sign of open-mindedness. The level can be lower than that for English, but not when dealing with clients. Oral skills are far more important than written ones, as the second foreign language is mostly used for meetings or negotiating with clients and for solving local problems (Didiot-Cook, Gauthier, & Scheirlinckx, 2000).

The applicability of short courses can bring about commendable yields, as vendors who speak French and English can build stronger relationships with non-Kinyarwanda-speaking customers, making their shopping experience smoother and more enjoyable. Indeed, with language proficiency, vendors can attract tourists, expatriates, and businesspeople, thereby expanding their customer base and boosting profits. In addition, short-term language courses for employees, particularly vendors, can lead to enhanced customer service by improving communication with diverse customers. This, in turn, can lead

to increased customer satisfaction and loyalty, which are crucial for business success (Rodriguez-Diaz, Jimenez, Bejarano, Bernal-Chávez, & Gelbukh, 2022).

Second, vendors should be encouraged to learn French and English. It goes without saying that a donkey can be taken to the river, but the decision to drink is entirely its own. To contextualize this, vendors need to be encouraged to learn new languages and join language centers around them. This is a task for the local administration, as their voices can be easily heard. Once the vendors commit themselves to learning French and English, they will be able to grasp the language of business in a short time, hence propelling their businesses. In addition, learning a second language is often seen as an interpersonal skill; however, it can contribute significantly to a country's economic output. Not only does it help increase global competitiveness, it can also enhance workforce productivity and improve trade relations (Newman, 2023).

Finally, there is a need to embrace technology in language learning. It was realized that most of the vendors have smartphones, which they mainly use to type prices for their customers to know how much a given product costs. Once language centers are introduced, it would be beneficial to supplement them with technology. This signifies the use of the phone internet to check the meanings of words, pronunciation, and the like. One participant said, "Since I know little English, I always upgrade my vocabulary using Google, online dictionaries, and other phone applications".

Thus, based on these strategies, one can conclude that language training, encouraging vendors to learn languages, and using technology to learn a new language can bring about positive changes in the way vendors communicate with their customers. Indeed, the integration of mobile devices in language learning has been found to significantly enhance learners' ability to access real-time language resources, improve vocabulary acquisition, and support language retention (Van & Thanh, 2021).

5. Conclusion

This subsection gives a brief summary of the findings and valuable insights into the linguistic challenges faced by small-scale vendors in Ejoheza Modern Market, Kigali, particularly in their interactions with non-Kinyarwanda-speaking customers.

5.1 Conclusion

The findings shared by the participants revealed a strong consensus among vendors on the critical role of effective communication in enhancing their business success. Language barriers, particularly the inability to speak English or French, pose significant challenges for many vendors in Kigali's Ejoheza Modern Market. While many have adopted strategies such as sign language and mobile phone price displays to overcome these hurdles, these solutions are often insufficient for more complex business interactions, such as explaining product details, persuading customers, and addressing their specific needs. This communication gap leads to lost sales and a competitive disadvantage, as customers often prefer to engage with vendors who can speak their language.

The vendors expressed a unified call for language training programs that were tailored to their needs. Short, practical courses in French and English, focusing on business-related vocabulary and phrases, would enable vendors to interact more confidently with non-Kinyarwanda-speaking customers, boosting their sales and business growth. Technology has also emerged as a potential solution, with many vendors using smartphones to enhance their language skills through apps and online resources. Integrating digital learning tools into language training programs would further empower vendors, offering them the flexibility to learn at their own pace and apply new skills directly to their business interactions.

Ultimately, the key takeaway is that language proficiency is not just a personal skill but a business necessity in a diverse and competitive marketplace. By addressing language barriers through accessible training and leveraging technology, vendors can enhance customer relationships, expand their market reach, and improve their overall economic performance. As such, it is essential for stakeholders, including the government, NGOs, and private enterprises, to support these initiatives and provide the

resources necessary for vendors to improve their communication skills and thrive in an increasingly multilingual and globalized economy. In conclusion, investing in language skills for small-scale vendors would not only enhance their individual businesses but also contribute to the economic development of Kigali's informal sector, fostering a more inclusive and dynamic market.

5.2 Limitation

This study did not conduct a comparative analysis across different markets, limiting its scope to specific locations within Kigali. Consequently, it is challenging to determine whether the identified communication weaknesses in French and English are representative of all small-scale vendors across the city. Without analyzing other markets, the findings may reflect localized issues rather than broader trends. This lack of comparative data makes it difficult to generalize the results and understand whether language challenges are consistent or vary depending on factors such as market size, location, and vendor demographics.

5.3 Suggestion

First, centers dedicated to language training should be established to cater specifically to market vendors, offering courses at low or no cost. In doing so, these centers should be easy to access, ideally within or near the market, and offer flexible learning options, including online learning modules or evening classes.

Second, on-site language lessons should be conducted directly at the market, making learning more convenient for vendors without requiring them to leave their stalls. This can be done by setting up mobile classrooms or temporary learning hubs in market areas, where trainers can offer bite-sized lessons and practice exercises tailored to real-life scenarios faced by vendors. This is likely to increase access to language learning, especially for vendors who may not have the time or resources to attend traditional classes, resulting in the immediate application of learned skills.

Third, peer-to-peer learning should be encouraged by identifying vendors who are already proficient in English or French and creating study groups or mentorship programs. This can be done by organizing language exchange groups, where vendors can practice speaking and learning from each other, and by offering incentives for those who help others improve their language skills. Moreover, multilingual signage (French, English, and Kinyarwanda) should be introduced in markets to assist both vendors and customers, ensuring that product names, prices, and key phrases are clearly displayed.

This can be achieved by collaborating with local government or market authorities to create standardized signage in multiple languages throughout the market, with easy-to-understand visual aids for product descriptions. Once completed, this will enhance customer understanding and satisfaction, particularly for non-Kinyarwanda-speaking buyers, fostering a more inclusive and attractive market environment. The awareness that economic returns ride on the wheels of language comprehension between the trader and his client has grown phenomenally, while economic internationalization and multilingualism have become two sides of the same coin (Akujobi, 2019).

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