

# How Do Nigerian Teachers React to the Current French Syllabus?<sup>1</sup>

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**T**HE West African Examinations Council introduced a new syllabus for School Certificate French in 1971. This syllabus is considered in many circles as revolutionary mainly because of the shift in aim "from a stress on literacy to one on oracy" (Brann, 1970). It has also been predicted that the syllabus will have highly desirable backwash effects on classroom teaching. One expects that, henceforth, teachers will have to use French in the classroom, that the teaching of the language will become more active, and that learners will (at the end of a five-year course in French) be able to follow conversations in the language spoken "at normal speed" and also be able to express themselves in simple, everyday French (Obanya, 1972). In addition, the new School Certificate course in French is expected to kindle the interest of learners in the language so that they can make further efforts to improve upon their skills, even if no formal study of French is undertaken after School Certificate.

There has been, however, a considerable amount of opposition to the new syllabus

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*Teachers involved in this study, irrespective of their qualifications, their teaching experience, and the length of their stay in a French-speaking environment, accord a favorable reception to the current French syllabus. They agree, however, that for the desirable changes envisaged by the "new French" to be achieved, more and better equipment will be necessary.*

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from several quarters. In June 1970, for example, the Lagos branch of the Nigerian Association of French Teachers (NAFT) sent a strongly worded letter to the West African Examinations Council urging it to suspend the introduction of the new syllabus. The Lagos NAFT felt that the "new French" would be very difficult to teach, that the rate of failure in School Certificate French examinations would increase, and that Nigerian pupils would subsequently be discouraged from learning French. At a conference on language teaching in Nigeria held in Ibadan in 1970, an experienced teacher of French regretted the complete disappearance of trans-

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| Item   | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | Mean score |
|--|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|------------|
| 1. The current syllabus is truly revolutionary and its makers should be congratulated.                           | 27             | 87    | 37      | 4        | —                 | 3.9        |
| 2. The current syllabus will make French the living language that it really is.                                  | 54             | 80    | 16      | 3        | 1                 | 4.2        |
| 3. The current syllabus emphasizes the not-very-useful skills of French.   | 1              | 7     | 40      | 82       | 24                | 3.5        |
| 4. The current syllabus will make the teaching of French a more rewarding venture.                               | 31             | 78    | 32      | 10       | 3                 | 3.8        |
| 5. The current French syllabus has been introduced rather prematurely.   | 4              | 12    | 27      | 81       | 20                | 3.5        |
| 6. The current French syllabus only serves to increase the teacher's work-load.                                  | 12             | 27    | 19      | 78       | 18                | 3.4        |
| 7. The current French syllabus encourages the teacher to go on improving his/her own French.                     | 68             | 64    | 10      | 7        | 5                 | 4.2        |
| 8. The current French syllabus would be better suited to countries with better equipped schools.                 | 39             | 41    | 36      | 39       | 5                 | 2.8        |
| 9. The current syllabus will help to increase pupils' motivation to learn French.                                | 38             | 79    | 26      | 10       | 1                 | 3.9        |
| 10. The current syllabus seeks to turn Nigerians into black French men.  | 3              | 10    | 24      | 68       | 59                | 4.3        |
| 11. The current syllabus will ensure that the French learned in school will become a permanent acquisition.      | 33             | 69    | 35      | 15       | 2                 | 3.4        |
| 12. The current syllabus makes it almost impossible for the Nigerian pupil to pass the WASC French examinations. | 1              | 5     | 13      | 75       | 60                | 4.2        |

Table 1. The Direction and Intensity of Nigerian Teachers' Reception of the Current French Syllabus (N = 154)

lations from the "new French," and frowned on the "over-enthusiasm for the oral approach" (Oyelola, 1970). More recently, a University Professor of French has joined in the call for a new shift of emphasis since, in his own words, "not every Nigerian needs French" (Evans, 1972).

The purpose of this study was to find out the intensity and direction of teachers' reception of the French syllabus after it has been in operation for three years. The study also attempted to find out the extent to which such variables as the teacher's qualifications, teaching experience, length of stay in a French-speaking country, and frequency with which French is used outside the classroom are likely to influence the teacher's acceptance or rejection of the "new French."

## Procedure

1. *The Sample.* This was made up of 154 teachers of French (94 men and 60 women) drawn from all corners of Nigeria. They had a modal teaching experience of 4 years and they had all participated in different types of short courses on the teaching problems posed by the "new French" at the

Institute of Education, University of Ibadan, between December 1970 and June 1972. They formed about one-third of the total number of teachers of French in Nigeria.

2. *Instrument.* A Likert-type attitude questionnaire was used for the study. The 12 statements of the questionnaire were summaries of the various favorable and unfavorable opinions expressed by earlier commentators on the "new French." This questionnaire had earlier been pretested for internal consistency and reliability by means of procedures suggested by Likert himself (Likert, 1932). All the 12 items differentiated satisfactorily between the higher and the lower thirds of the pretest sample (N = 46). The questionnaire had a split-half reliability index of .79. One other section of the questionnaire consisted of 10 items, also on a five-point scale, requiring the respondent to rate the frequency of his or her use of French outside the classroom (Section B of the research instrument). Section A sought other relevant personal information about the respondent such as professional and academic qualifications, teaching experience, and length of stay in a French-speaking environment.

## Results and Discussion

1. *The Overall Picture.* Table 1 shows the direction and intensity of subjects' reaction to the "new French." Items 10, 12, 7, and 2 have the highest mean scores (4.3 for item 10 and 4.2 for items 12, 7, and 2 out of a maximum possible score of 5). All other items (with the exception of 8) have mean scores ranging from 3.4 to 3.9. This indicates an acceptance by the subjects of the favorable statements on the questionnaire (items 1, 2, 4, 7, 9, and 11) and a non-acceptance of most of the unfavorable ones (items 3, 5, 6, 10, and 12). The relatively low mean score on item 8 indicates that the subjects are agreed that more and better equipment will be needed for a more successful implementa-

tion of the new syllabus. It therefore appears that, from the experience of classroom teachers, the fears about the success of the current French syllabus have been exaggerated. It is interesting that the most unfavorable statement ever made about the "new French" (item 10) was rejected by 127 of the 154 teachers who completed the questionnaire. This indicates an almost wholesale disagreement with the statement.

2. *The Influence of Teaching Experience.* The subjects were classified according to teaching experience, as shown in Table 2, and mean scores on the whole attitude scale were calculated for each group. No significant difference was found between the mean scores of the various groups, although sub-

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| Teaching Experience | N   | Mean Score |
|---------------------|-----|------------|
| Less than 1 year    | 18  | 46         |
| 1-4 years           | 75  | 45         |
| 5-8 years           | 46  | 46         |
| Over 8 years        | 15  | 47         |
| Whole Group         | 154 | 45         |

Table 2. The Influence of Teaching Experience on Teachers' Reception of the Current French Syllabus

jects who had taught French for more than eight years had a slightly higher mean score than any other group of respondents. This aspect of the results indicates that, irrespective of the length of teaching experience, the teachers concerned have definitely not accorded a hostile reception to the "new French."

The teaching experience variable was brought into the study because it was thought that inexperience could influence a teacher's reaction to such curricular innovations as are envisaged by the makers of the current French syllabus. On the other hand it was also felt that long teaching experience could exercise a negative influence on the attitude of some teachers. This is mainly because experience could condition one to continue to behave in a stereotyped manner. The most highly experienced teachers in the group were largely people who were trained under classical traditions of foreign language teaching and one would have suspected that they would tend

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to teach, in the words of Yoloje, "in the same way that they were taught" (Yoloje, 1970). The results presented in Table 2 do not, however, justify this suspicion.

3. *The Influence of the Teacher's Qualifications.* The subjects were grouped into two classes of "qualified" and "non-qualified" teachers of French, following a classification used in an earlier study (Obanya, 1971). The first group was made up of graduates in French, holders of the NCE (Nigerian Certificate of Education), and French or Francophone African nationals with the *baccalauréat* or higher qualifications. All other categories of teachers of French constituted the second group. It was thought that the individual teacher's reception of the "new French" would be influenced by his other qualifications as these could add to the degree of the teacher's confidence to face the challenges posed by the syllabus under discussion. As can be seen from Table 3, however, this point of view did not receive empirical support as there was no significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups of French teachers on the attitude scale.

| Category of Teacher | N   | Mean Score |
|---------------------|-----|------------|
| Qualified           | 170 | 46         |
| Unqualified         | 34  | 44         |
| Whole Group         | 154 | 45         |

Table 3. The Relationship between Teachers' Qualifications and Reception of the Current French Syllabus

4. *Length of Residence in a French-speaking Country and Reception of the "New French."* Residence in an environment where the language is used for communication is now widely recognized as an effective means of improving the foreign language learner's proficiency. This is particularly true of spoken language. Since the current French syllabus lays considerable emphasis on oracy, it was thought that the increased fluency which results from prolonged residence abroad would be an important factor influencing the Nigerian teacher's reaction to the "new French." Table 4 does not, however, justify this hypothesis, for the subjects who had not lived in a French environment at all

| Length of Residence Abroad            | N   | Mean Score |
|---------------------------------------|-----|------------|
| None                                  | 17  | 47         |
| Short stay (up to 6 months)           | 30  | 47         |
| Stay of adequate length (7-12 months) | 69  | 45         |
| Long stay (over 1 year)               | 38  | 45         |
| Whole Group                           | 154 | 45         |

Table 4: The Influence of Length of Residence Abroad on Teachers' Reception of the "New French"

(and those with short periods of residence) even showed a slightly higher tendency to support an oracy-oriented French syllabus. This aspect of the results is of course understandable, for such teachers, very much aware of their own lack of proficiency in oral French, may not like to subscribe to a system which tends to perpetuate this same malaise.

5. *The Relationship between use of French and Reaction to the Current Syllabus.* As was pointed out earlier, the teachers who participated in the study were asked to rate themselves on the frequency with which they used French in listening, speaking, reading, and writing situations *outside the classroom*. It is generally believed that proficiency in the use of a foreign language can be improved by constant use of the language in question. This, in fact, is one of the changes of behavior which the current French syllabus seeks to bring about. The scores of teachers on this self-rating scale were correlated with their scores on the attitude questionnaire and a correlation co-efficient of .63 was obtained. This indicates that some form of close relationship exists between the teacher's effort to use French outside the classroom and his or her reaction to a syllabus which emphasizes the *use of French*.

## Conclusions

The obvious conclusion which emerges from a consideration of the results presented in the preceding section is that the teachers involved in the study, irrespective of their qualifications, their teaching experience, and the length of their stay in a French-speaking environment, accord a favorable reception to the current French syllabus. They seem to be agreed that the changes envisaged by the "new French" are desirable but that for

the intended goals to be achieved, more and better equipment will be necessary.

These results also have their implications for curriculum planning. It appears that the initial "hostile" reaction to the "new French" was due to a failure on the part of innovators to ensure adequate participation by school teachers during the planning stages. French teachers who responded to our questionnaire were all men and women who had had the opportunity of discussing aspects of the "new French" in conferences, courses, and workshops. Their reception of these curricular innovations could perhaps have been different if they had been denied the opportunity of getting initiated into the philosophy behind the current syllabus.

The results also raise problems for further research. It would be worthwhile to find out what types of teaching equipment are needed by teachers of French in Nigeria, which of these are at the moment available, and what could be done to solve the problem. The question of out-of-class use of French is also intriguing and deserves to be further investigated.

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