Résumé

Citer ce document / Cite this document :

doi : 10.3406/cea.1978.2382

Document généré le 02/06/2016
The current debate on the hegemony of English in Nigeria as the official language for administration and the most important language for commerce is not usually given a historical approach. And although some of the existing studies have attempted to explain how and why English has supplanted the Nigerian mother tongues, there has been no adequate study of the history of modern language teaching in Nigeria.1 Yet French and German were among the earliest subjects introduced into the Nigerian secondary schools as from 1859 when the first secondary school was founded in Lagos.2 The Wesleyan High School and Training Institution, opened in April 1878 in Lagos, made provision for ‘French and other modern languages’ provided charge of 7/6d per quarter was made for each.3 And the first government secondary school, King’s School, Lagos, founded in 1909 listed French, Greek, and German as optional subjects.4

Furthermore native speakers of both languages were never lacking in the country in the pioneering days of the learning of the subjects. For example, French and German population in Lagos, the centre of political and educational life of Nigeria, was consistently sizable. In 1881 there were 45 Germans and 5 French nationals; 44 British, 3 Portuguese, 1 Bra-

* I wish to thank the archivists at the Archives Nationales, Rue Oudinot, Paris; Congrégation du Saint-Esprit, Rue Lhomond, Paris; National Archives, Ibadan and Kaduna, Nigeria; the University of Cambridge; the University of Oxford; and the University of London; the Keeper of the Public Records, London; the librarians of the British Museum, London; and the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, for permission to use their depositories for this work.


zilian, 4 Swiss, 2 Danes, 2 Italians, 1 Norwegian and 4 Americans in Lagos. Given the various factors listed above which seemed to facilitate the promotion of modern languages in the country, one is struck by the poor progress in the learning of the languages during the period under study.

This article attempts to examine the status of modern languages in Nigeria, the circumstances which made it possible for English to assume its powerful position in Nigeria, and to remain unrivalled by either the Nigerian mother tongues or any of the other European languages such as French or German. The paper also discusses the progress in the teaching and learning of French and German as from 1859, when both languages were recognised in the secondary schools' curriculum, to 1959 when University College, Ibadan, appointed two lecturers to form the nucleus of a Modern Languages Department which was later established in 1962.

THE ATTITUDE OF THE FRENCH AND GERMAN GOVERNMENTS

It seems that one of the most decisive factors which influenced the teaching of French and German in colonial Nigeria was the attitude of the French and German governments. Both governments appeared totally indifferent to the status of the French and German languages in Nigeria until after the country became independent. By contrast, one is struck by the enthusiasm with which the French government for example has promoted the teaching of French in Nigeria since independence through the award of bursaries and the provision of cultural centres and literature.

A possible explanation for the attitude of the governments could be a realisation of their own limitations. Germany appeared interested in consolidating its possessions. France had won a large slice of African soil during the scramble for Africa and was busy establishing her culture

6. The existing studies on the teaching of Modern Languages in Nigeria are largely accounts of the problems of French teaching in post-independence period in Nigeria and are pioneered by C. M. B. Brann and P. A. I. Obanya of the University of Ibadan. For details of the nature of those later programs, see University of Ibadan, Department and Institute of Education, Brief Historical Review 1955-73 (Ibadan, 1973).
and civilisation in these territories. All energy was required for this, and a further educational investment outside its sphere of influence could have been an unwelcome distraction. The governments possibly thought that sponsorship of a language other than English in British colonies would be a challenge to an agreed colonial policy. For already in the colonies there was a remarkable degree of cooperation between French and British colonial officials in the promotion of trade, the arrest of fugitive immigrants, the establishment of border posts, and immigration and customs control.

There is no doubt that the colonial powers agreed that it was the responsibility of the occupying colonial power not only to administer the occupied land but to replace the traditional institutions by 'modern' institutions. Language teaching was considered a necessary tool of administration and the responsibility of the colonial power. This approach was apparently sanctioned by the study team which visited Africa in 1920 and 1921, under the leadership of Thomas Jesse Jones and the auspices of the Phelps-Stokes Fund and Foreign Mission Societies of North America and Europe. Having suggested that African 'tribal languages' should be used in the lower elementary standards or grades in the existing schools and that a lingua franca of African origin should be introduced in the middle classes of a school situated in an area where large native groups speak diverse languages, the study team recommended that 'the language of the European nation in control should be taught in the upper standards'. The study team further recommended that in secondary schools 'the first foreign language to be taught is that of the European power in control. Native leadership must be able to confer freely with the government'.

The French language could therefore not be a major Nigerian language, despite the fact that it was by no means subject to the myriad of reasons advanced for the unsuitability of 'vernacular' in schools. For unlike 'vernacular' languages which were seen to be suffering from paucity of reading material, multiplicity of dialects and the absence of facilities for research, the French language has served as Europe's lingua franca during the 18th century, the age of Enlightenment, and was proudly spoken in most European courts.

The Waning of French and German Influence

It is frequently forgotten that the English language acquired its status as the language of communication among the several ethnic groups in Nigeria only because it was taught in schools distributed all over the country. Thus, in order to explain the growth of the English language at the expense of French or the Nigerian mother tongues, one should examine other factors which militated against the teaching of French in Nigerian schools.

Firstly if one accepts as convincing the view that Nigerians began to have a smattering of English because this was needed by the government and commercial firms for interpreting and for the conduct of routine duties, one must necessarily focus attention on French interests in Nigeria. Compared with the British, the number of French traders in Nigeria by the mid-19th century was small. For the French had gradually been squeezed out of Nigeria when the British occupied Lagos in 1851. And a further development came when the more powerful British companies bought out the shares of French Compagnie du Sénégal and Société de l’Afrique Équatoriale, the leading French firms. By 1900 the situation in Nigeria was made more complex with the revocation of the Charter of the British firm, the Royal Niger Company, and the establishment of British colonial administration in Nigeria.

By 1905 the effect of British rule could be felt in most parts of Nigeria with the installation of an apparatus of law and order, postal system and communication network. This inevitably brought more British personnel to Nigeria. As a French priest observed:

'It is however true that a few French companies such as the Compagnie Francaise d’Afrique Occidentale and John Walker soon got established. But these restricted their activities to business and took no part in the administration of the country. They also contented themselves with recruiting Nigerian versed in the English language. Sometimes workers were recruited from Cotonou in Dahomey and transferred to Lagos, but these were very few indeed.

At any rate most French traders took up residence in Lagos, leaving only a handful of their compatriots in the interior. Under this circumstance, there were very few Frenchmen in the interior to provide the necessary incentive to learn French. In Lagos and in the whole of

Southern Nigeria, there were few French people. In its *Report on the Southern Nigeria Census* in 1911, the government of the colony of Lagos and the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria stated that the European population was 1,526 males and 135 females, and that among these were 1,383 British, 168 Germans, 43 French, 19 Italians, 6 Austrians and 6 Greeks.\(^{13}\) Table I shows the distribution of French and British nationals in Nigeria between 1931 and 1960.

**Table I. — Population of Lagos Township in 1931 and 1950**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>1931</th>
<th>1950</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nigerians</td>
<td>117,554</td>
<td>217,301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>2,952</td>
<td>5,414</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Commonwealth</td>
<td>3,768</td>
<td>12,955</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Table II. — Non-African Population of Nigeria Classified According to Nationality, 1952-53**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>North</th>
<th>West</th>
<th>East</th>
<th>Lagos</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British</td>
<td>2,924</td>
<td>2,074</td>
<td>1,715</td>
<td>3,147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germans</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Between 1903 and 1959 all the Governors were English speaking, so were the Directors of Education, Colonial Secretaries, Residents, District Officers, Principals and Headmasters of schools.\(^{14}\)


14. Information is compiled from the *Nigeria Civil Service List: The Preliminary Inventory of the Archives of the Nigerian Secretariat 1914-54*, compiled by L. C. Gwam (Ibadan, National Archives Headquarters): 196; and the *Inventory of the Administrative Records from the Colony Province*, compiled by L. C. Gwam (Ibadan, National Archives Headquarters): 196. Unfortunately, there was no trace in the archives of the answers to the forms despatched to Nigerian colonial officials with instructions that they ‘should be completed legibly in manuscript in the interests of speed’; Section 7 of the forms had asked for information on ‘proficiency in languages other than English’.
The initiative for planning education which would be tailored to the needs of commerce and business remained with English-speaking priests and businessmen. This was the background to the establishment of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) Grammar School, Lagos, in 1859 under the inspiration of the expatriate businessman, Captain J. P. L. Davies. Like the schools later founded by the Wesleyans and Anglicans, the CMS Grammar School provided courses in English, Mathematics, Latin and Euclid. As Ajayi states ‘the secondary schools were in fact no more than senior primary schools, conducted wholly in English, with a bit of Latin, and Mathematics, and recitations of poetry...’ Although French was not excluded from the school curriculum, its teaching was of poor quality.

The outbreak of World War I had some negative effect on the Germans in Nigeria many of whom were harassed by the British administration and subsequently left Nigeria. Some who remained in the country were treated as suspects. And as late as 1929 the Roman Catholic authorities in Eastern Nigeria reported that German Fathers were unwilling to be placed under English, Irish, Portuguese or French Ordinaries. The recruitment of German priests was therefore not encouraged. Furthermore the Versailles treaty of 1919 which heaped the blames of World War I on Germany remained until the outbreak of World War II. And when World War II broke out in 1939, Germans were once more blamed for aggression and school children in Nigeria sang war songs to condemn Hitler and the German people:

Hitler, a scatter brain
Who's never had an issue, and thus does not
[appreciate the value of children;]
He has no compassion, no virtuous thoughts,
God, the Creator of the Universe,
Please strike Hitler dead,
That he may stop his machinations.

---

17. I am grateful to Dr. Jide Osuntokun for this information on German nationals in Nigeria during World War I.
18. CSSp 554/8/V, Communication from Superior General to P. Shanahan, 23.7.1929.
19. I am grateful to Dr. G. A. Akinola for making available his collection of school songs composed during World War II.
Such indeed was the force of British propaganda against the Germans that the atmosphere in the country was by no means conducive to the continued stay of Germans or to the promotion of German studies including the language, history or culture.

The Role of the French and German Missionaries

The last hope for the survival of the French and German came with the arrival of the French and German missionaries to Nigeria. The first Roman Catholic Mission to settle down in Nigeria was the Society of African Missions founded in Lyons on December 8, 1856, by Marion Bresillac.20 The Mission to Nigeria, led by an Irish priest, began its work west of the river Niger in 1868, about 27 years after the first English-speaking missionary arrived in Nigeria. It is significant that the French missionaries who joined the mission service from France and those who crossed over from Dahomey to join the newly-installed mission did not consider it expedient to promote the teaching of French.

In 1885 another Catholic Mission, the Holy Ghost Fathers, with headquarters in Paris, took over the work of establishing the Catholic faith east of the river Niger. Founded by Father Liebermann, a French priest from Alsace, the Holy Ghost Fathers were dedicated to missionary work in Black Africa.21 The mission to Nigeria was led by a French Father, Joseph Lutz. Father Lutz’s aides, Fathers Horne, Hermas and Jean Grotto, were all French. They established mission centres at Agouleri, Nzube, and Onitsha. This team was later joined by Father Reling and Fathers Raulas and Lejeune, all three of them French; and Father (later Bishop) Joseph Shanahan. Although Shanahan was Irish, he was educated in Paris and was ‘très fort en français’ having studied Classics and theology at the Paris headquarters of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost Fathers.

Like their colleagues who worked to the west of the river Niger, the Holy Ghost Fathers began to use the school system for the promotion of their evangelisation crusade. Schools were established in large numbers and the curriculum prescribed by the colonial government was faithfully followed. In its schools program the Catholic Mission was guided by desire to co-operate with the colonial government. By 1891 the Holy Ghost Fathers reported that they were not initiating any novel educational experiment in the country. ‘The country having been brought under the control of England,’ the Fathers reported, ‘English

is the official language.' The Fathers were enthusiastic when they reported that 'many of our pupils speak it considerably well, and even write it'. The role of the Catholic Fathers has been described as characteristic of the desire of Catholic Fathers to co-operate with secular authorities. As Horner asserts,

'... the Roman Catholic [Church] has been accustomed to official relationships with political States in one way or the other since the fourth century. This Church hopes and plans for an eventual concordat with every State [and] will take full advantage of whatever useful relationships can be affected. Far from showing suspicion of government subsidies, the Roman Catholic Church regards them as her just due and protests [at] reluctance on the part of any government to make them available.'

Perhaps it is more pertinent to explain the attitude of the Fathers by the requests of Nigerians for schools of their choice in which the White man's language would be taught. In view of the growing importance of English in the school system and for employment opportunities, the Catholic Fathers reasonably considered it wiser to teach English rather than French or vernacular. Thus, as in most mission schools, the teaching of English was vigorously pursued. The results were most rewarding. The Catholic Mission schools grew and won increased recognition among the people.

The activities of the Catholic Mission were in sharp contrast to the determination of the Anglican Church to emphasise teaching in vernacular. The consequence of the approach of the Anglican Church to the teaching of English was a loss in membership of the Anglican Church.

The Catholic priests constantly reminded themselves of a need to cooperate with the government and at the same time to win the affection and respect of the local population. This objective was achieved in large measure by their English language program. They seemed to believe that they would become suspect in the colonial setting if they encouraged the study of French, and they therefore preferred to give little attention to the teaching of their native language. Reporting their activities in 1904, the Holy Ghost Fathers explained that:

'Bien que nous soyons Français en majorité dans notre Préfecture, le gouvernement préfère cependant nos élèves. Si nous pouvions répondre favorablement à toutes ses demandes, toute l'influence dans l'intérieur serait à nous.'

The Mission remained consistent in its language program throughout the period of its activity in Nigeria. French priests who were sent to Nigeria made great efforts to be well-versed in English. For example, Father Lena, who was from Vannes in the province of Rennes in France, studied English and succeeded in producing pupils who obtained awards of excellence in English language at competitions organised for schools. And, even during emergencies when teachers were needed for Catholic schools in the country, Father Shanahan emphasised the need for priests coming to Nigeria to have a working knowledge of the English language. He insisted in one of his letters that ‘il serait indispensable d’avoir deux Sœurs possédant le Certificat officiel d’enseignement primaire anglais’. And he explained that the country had no urgent need for German Sisters.

The language policy of the Catholic Fathers should be seen in the light of the evangelisation work of priests who risked their lives by coming to Africa where ‘sun poured down with merciless fury’, and ‘night [. . .] made hideous by clouds of mosquitoes settling on blistered hands and faces’. On arrival in Nigeria the Fathers noted that many Nigerians already spoke broken English; but that Nigerians wished to learn English in view of the economic and social advantages which the knowledge of English brought to the speaker and writer. It seems more appropriate, therefore, to see the language issues as a necessary development from the missionary zeal of the French priests who sacrificed their language to save souls for Christ in Africa, to resist ‘l’invasion des sectes protestantes’, and to fight ‘the Godless schools founded by the government’. Perhaps the account of a dream in which Father Shanahan had protested to superior who had insulted him, could summarise this selflessness to missionary work by the French priests:

‘Insult me—yes, by all means!
Insult my country—perhaps!
But insult Saint Patrick—never!
Never—mon père—never!’

In their reports and prayers French priests seemed to consider their French nationality only as secondary to their evangelical work. They spoke more of ‘le bon Dieu’ and directed their correspondence to Rome on important ecclesiastical issues. Their letters to Paris were mainly reports of their expense and income, and their progress in missionary endeavour. The prayer of Father Lutz, the founder of the Holy Ghost Mission in Nigeria, is striking. Father Lutz, a French priest, prayed in 1900:

28. JORDAN: 27.
‘On my knees I beg the favour of devoting my life to the salvation of souls in Africa, even though it means death. Let me save but a single soul and I shall die with the desire of my heart fulfilled.’

In later years they considered their language program as part of their effort to fight government schools which were ‘institution without God’ and Protestant schools which made it possible for ‘our enemies’ to increase in numerical strength. This feature of interdenominational rivalry through the educational institutions was highlighted in the official account of the growth of the Catholic Mission in Eastern Nigeria:

‘On s’aperçu alors que le succès des Protestants tenait à leurs écoles, montées à la moderne d’après les programmes du gouvernement britannique. On s’essaya à faire de même et on y réussit assez bien, car le pouvoir civil regardait peu à la différence religieuse en matière d’assistance scolaire et, d’autre part, la population donna vite confiance aux prêtres catholiques. Les résultats des examens, sanctionnés par des subsides importants, firent vivre les missions.’

The story of the efforts of the German priests is perhaps equally interesting. It is not usually known that a German missionary, Reverend G. F. Bühler was on the staff of the Church Missionary Society Training Institution at Abeokuta between 1857 and 1864. Yet, this German priest made considerable impact on his students. However his influence was felt more in the field of administration (he was Principal of the Institution from 1857 to 1864) and music than in language education. Thus Dr. Nathaniel King (1847-1884), who trained under him, became an accomplished musician. Another of his students, Robert A. Coker also distinguished himself in music and was named by his contemporaries, ‘Mozart of West Africa’ under whose direction, ‘the Christ Church Cathedral initiated the practice of Easter Services featuring anthems and choruses’. Coker also became ‘friendly with the German Consul, Herr Johanning with whom he organised a concert at Glover Hall in 1893’.

Like the French Catholic priests, Reverend Bühler was primarily an evangelist, who lived to win souls for Christ. The dissemination of the knowledge of his mother tongue was not a priority. When his wife, Sophia Mary, died of fever on January 4, 1861, at Ake, Abeokuta, the English Edition of Iwe Irohin reported that Sophia Mary died as she had lived in the faith of Jesus and with the certain hope of an inheritance above with the Saviour.

The role of Reverend Bühler in the promotion of English and Nigerian mother tongues can be compared to that of Diedrich Westermann, the

29. Quoted by JORDAN: 17.
30. BRIAULT: 520.
German professor and director of the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures founded in 1929. A professor at Berlin University, Westermann spent a considerable portion of his life in the promotion of African indigenous languages and was a prominent inspirer for the foundation of the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures.33

**The Impact of the British**

The British government did not seriously make any conscious contribution to the teaching of French or German. Instead it actively encouraged the study of English in its grant-aided and government-owned schools. For example, the Education Ordinance of 1882 made the teaching of English compulsory in the categories of schools mentioned above. ‘Vernacular’ and other European languages were excluded. And when ‘vernacular’ was later added to elementary schools curriculum, French and German remained excluded. The government did not however object to their being taught as supplementary subjects at the secondary schools, and did not protest when Nigerians began to offer French as an optional examination subject.

The British colonial government indirectly contributed to the advancement of the learning of French by the provision of French examinations in Nigerian secondary schools. Under the existing arrangements, Nigerian students could sit the Cambridge Preliminary, Cambridge Junior, and Cambridge Senior examinations; Oxford Preliminary, Oxford Junior, and Oxford Senior examinations; the London Matriculation and the Intermediate Arts and Degree examinations of London University. It was hoped that this arrangement would make it possible to assess the effectiveness of French teachers and their students through external evaluations. This exercise was then expected to inspire students and stimulate their teachers, and therefore advance the study of the prescribed subjects.

But since the examination bodies invited and approved by the government in Nigeria were from England, examination scripts, including those in French, had to be written in English. It was therefore impossible to pass the examinations unless the candidate had a sufficient knowledge of the English language. English was prominent in the time-tables in secondary schools; it was taught as a subject and served as the language of instruction.

As a logical consequence of the operation of examinations by the

33. The study of the life and work of Professor Westermann is still much neglected by educational or missionary historians. Some useful information on his contributions to African language studies can be found among Oldham Papers at the Offices of the Missionary Societies of Great Britain and Ireland, Eaton Gate, London.
English examination bodies, English text-books, English authors and English educational documents became works of reference in Nigerian schools and public libraries.

French studies also tended to promote the study of English because of the emphasis on translations from English to French, and from French to English. Although grammar and composition were taught, the emphasis was on the need to use the subject as a vehicle for the promotion of communication between the English people and the French. Although some English educationists believed that it was more important to learn to understand, speak, and later on to write French and have translations ‘banned or else deferred to a comparatively late date’, the ‘old orthodox school’, who were trained in the classical traditions, were more influential in the making of the school curriculum and were ‘thorough believers in the sufficiency of grammar, translation and composition’.34

The examination regulations in French provided for the translation of English prose and verse passages into the foreign language, a free composition with an outline given either in English or the foreign language, and sometimes a comprehensive test in the form of a passage of the foreign language prose to which certain questions, in English, were appended to be answered in English.

One may illustrate the type of expectations demanded from students of Modern Language in Nigeria. In the first examination in the French language conducted in Nigeria in December 1910, the candidates were asked to give the 2nd person singular of the present indicative of bouillir, envoyer, valoir; the 2nd person plural of the present subjunctive of boire, conclure, s’en aller; and the present participle of savoir, maudire, joindre. They were also requested to translate into French: ‘He is not so stupid as you think; hold your tongue you don’t know what you are saying; he loves and obeys his father; and he has been angry with me for a fortnight.’ The candidates were further asked to translate some sentences and passages from French into English.35

It was therefore usual for teachers to teach modern languages in English and insist on the mastery of the English language during the modern language lessons. More hours were also given to the teaching of English than to any other subject in the schools.36 It should be noted that the English examination bodies promoted the study of English culture and tradition, and used the relevant French literature on the subject. Thus when the Syndics of the Cambridge University Press decided in October 1899 to have a book for use in schools, Verral of Newnham College, Cambridge, prepared a book based on a selection made

35. See the Cambridge University Local Examinations Syndicate (hereinafter Cambridge Syndicate), Annual Report for 1910.
by Hector Malot from his larger book, *Sans Famille*, and focused attention on the adventures of a foundling, Rémi, picked up as a baby in the Avenue de Breteuil in Paris, at the fields of Bethnal Green, the offices of Lincoln's Inn, and in the streets of central London.37

As part of its contribution to educational development in the colonies, the British government also set up an Institute of Education in London in 1929. Perhaps the greatest contribution of the Institute has been its establishment of the Chair of Education occupied by distinguished academics including Margaret Read and L. J. Lewis, who counselled that all concerned with the education of dependent peoples must always be highly objective and intimately personal, seek to make the instrument of education as efficient as possible, bearing in mind that the recipients of this education are human beings whose family, religious community and community ties are very different from those which influence the way of life in Britain. Many British educationists have therefore worked hard on designing more suitable English syllabuses without lowering standards, and contributed to various colonial examination schemes, thus making English studies even more attractive than French.

**Nigerians Struggle for the Mastery of the French Language**

It is imperative to note that most Nigerians continued to accept their mother tongue as the first language. But for purposes of contact and communication in business, many of them had begun to speak 'pidgin English' and 'pidgin French' by the middle of the 19th century. Thus the French priest Lutz met 'a guide who could speak some English'38 on arrival in Onitsha in 1885. Jordan explains that this guide was one of the 'servants of the Company' (the Royal Niger Company).39 But initially Nigerians did not care what European language was taught in the country and protested against the 1882 Ordinance which established English as the medium of instruction in Lagos schools. The *Lagos Times* considered this Ordinance a contempt of the Nigerian people and asked: 'How ridiculous it would be to proscribe the teaching of English in England in preference to Russian, French or German.'40

However, in view of the indifference of the French and German governments and French and German residents in Nigeria to the teaching of French and German, Nigerians had to depend on the facilities provided by the British government. Only King's College, Lagos, made some provision for the effective teaching of modern languages in the country and only French was selected. The existing mission Teacher Training Colleges on which the nation depended for its teaching staff, emphasised

37. M. de Gaudrion Verrall.
40. See *Lagos Times*, 12.7.1882.
the learning of Latin, Greek, and English, in addition to teaching methods, philosophy and history.

It is, however, interesting to note that in spite of the teething difficulties which confronted the Nigerian students, they resolved to attempt to learn French and consequently to take public examinations in the subject. The explanation for this may be that the exclusion of French from elementary school curricula aroused the curiosity of the more inquisitive Nigerian pupils who therefore determined to take a closer look at the subject by studying it as a school subject at the secondary school level. Another probable reason could be the awareness of the French language, French culture and France from accounts given by Nigeria’s neighbours, notably the French-speaking people of Dahomey.  

For these, being French subjects, had a knowledge of French civilisation. And through trading activities and family connections across the border, the Francophone Africans possibly spoke of their new masters and told stories about the romance of France, her language and people. The saying ‘See Paris and Die’ which emphasised the beauty and charm of Paris and its people, gradually became popular in Nigeria where parents sent their children mainly to the United Kingdom and America.

The view that Nigerians possibly began to study French for employment reasons would be less acceptable. For a certificate in the French language could lead only to careers in journalism, information services, public relations, library work, teaching, broadcasting or interpretation. But in Nigeria newspapers were published in the ‘vernacular’ and in English, and so French was of no relevance. Furthermore recruitment into specialised fields of public relations and information services was carried out by the Colonial Office in London and not delegated to the Governor. As for schools, very few offered French—and mostly at post-primary school level—, which would make a holder of the School Certificate in the French language unemployable in the teaching field.

Perhaps a more plausible explanation for the study of French by Nigerians is that it was accepted in the educational world as an academic subject and, in the spirit of the age, the Black man needed to show excellence in a subject, irrespective of the content. The first African President of Nigeria, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, used a similar justification for the study of logic which he counselled his compatriots to pursue.  

Ayandele believes that some Africans in Nigeria were aware of such assertions as A. L. Cureau’s to the effect that ‘the Black man could only be made a good joiner or mechanic’.  

Nigerian parents must have also loved to encourage their more gifted

41 For the description of the strong ties between Dahomey and Nigeria, see M. OMOLEWA, ‘Dahomey Immigrants in Nigeria, 1900-1975’, Nigeria Magazine, in press.
42 Quoted in M. OJIKE, My Africa (New York, the John Day Company, 1946): 82, and in EKECHI: 188.
children to attempt to study French. Nigerians who therefore considered themselves good at languages took to French. There was also the fact that French could be taken as an optional language paper to complete the requirements for the award of certificates by the examination bodies in England.\footnote{The English Examination Boards Regulations required candidates to pass a minimum of five subjects selected from at least three groups including group 1. The group division was as follows: Group 1: English. Group 2: History, Latin, Yoruba, French, Religious Knowledge. Group 3: Arithmetic, Geometry, Algebra, Geography, Physics, Chemistry, Botany, Biology. Group 4: Drawing, Bookkeeping, Shorthand, Art.} But equally possible is the view that Nigerians studied French because they attached some importance to the mastery of languages and that many of them would be delighted with the opportunity provided to study French in addition to other foreign languages, mainly English and Latin.

Nigerians who offered French at examinations, however, worked under severe limitations. First, there was inadequate provision of literature in French either in the schools or at the few public libraries. Then, there were few people in Nigeria who were familiar with the language. This situation made it very difficult for the beginner in French to find some competent person to correct his mistakes. The situation also made it difficult for the student to acquire the proper pronunciation, or to have a fairly accurate intonation in French, a serious drawback since the aim of language teaching is to enable pupils to approximate as near as possible the speech of native speakers.

Furthermore, because the language was not given priority attention in the schools, insufficient time was given to it in the time-table.\footnote{\textit{Awoniyi; Omolewa} (1975a).} Yet the student needed a lot of contact with the teacher in the absence of gramophone records which he could not afford. The fact that the French language played no vital role in the award of certificates is equally significant. For many candidates who failed in French were able to obtain full certificates, whereas failure in the English language brought doom to the Nigerian candidate no matter how well he distinguished himself in other subjects. This therefore was the background to the practice of reserving more hours to the study of English in schools and less hours to the study of other ‘ordinary’ subjects such as French. Many school principals and teachers began to take the teaching of English too seriously.

Unknown to the Nigerian students, there were studies which drew attention to the problem of learning more than two or three languages. Already, the Nigerian child had to learn his mother tongue to converse with his parents and neighbours; and he then went on to learn English at elementary school. At the secondary school level he was encouraged to study Latin as part of his education in the Classics. He therefore usually took up French as the fourth subject. But as Paul Christophersen asserts,
It is not possible for an ordinary human brain to handle more than two—or at most three—languages with any degree of perfection. It is possible to speak several languages fairly fluently i.e. without hesitation and with a tolerable degree of accuracy—but to be "at home" in more than two or three languages, to use them with the same ease and accuracy as native speakers, is not given to ordinary mortals.\footnote{46}

Christophersen then draws attention to the basic problem of those who study foreign or second languages. He explains that 'keeping up two languages can sometimes be a strain, even if one has known them both from childhood'. And he concludes that:

'Most unilingual people are not conscious of any effort when speaking their native tongue, and they assume that for the bilingual it is the same with his two languages.\footnote{47} Bilingualism does undoubtedly require a greater mental effort than unilingualism.'\footnote{47}

The first public examination in French for Nigerians was held in December 1910.\footnote{48} Seven Nigerians entered for the Cambridge Junior examinations, four of these for French. Only one of the four passed the French oral and written examination designed ‘to test the candidate’s ability to understand what is spoken, speak so as to be understood, and read what has been written’. Unfortunately the student who passed the French paper failed the examination while candidate No. 242, I. L. Oluwole, who failed the French paper, passed the examination having done very well in the compulsory subjects including English language. In December 1912, 23 candidates were entered for the Cambridge Preliminary examination but all those who sat the French paper failed.\footnote{49} No candidates entered for French in the Cambridge Junior examination for that year. The three candidates who entered for the Cambridge Senior examination in French failed the paper but passed the examination; two of them also passed in Latin. In December 1914, the results of Nigerians who sat the French paper at the Cambridge Preliminary examination continued to be bad and all the candidates failed the examination in French.\footnote{50}

There were no entries for French in the Oxford University Delegacy examinations held in Lagos between 1929 and 1937—Nigerian candidates having selected Latin, Shakespeare and Composition; and in 1937, Yoruba.\footnote{51}

\footnote{46} P. Christophersen, Bilingualism: An Inaugural Lecture Delivered at University College, Ibadan, on 17.11.1948 (London, Methuen, 1949): 1.
\footnote{47} Ibid.: 2.
\footnote{49} Cambridge Syndicate, Annual Report for 1912.
\footnote{50} Cambridge Syndicate, Annual Report for 1914.
Despite the appalling poor results in the French papers at various examinations and the limited facilities for its teaching, Nigerians continued to show considerable interest in the subject. It was offered at the University evening classes in Lagos up till 1950, when the institution folded up. And with the approach of independence, Nigerians began to give serious consideration to establishing a University Department where French could be taught. As Abiri explains, ‘an awareness of the need for Nigeria to engage in diplomatic relationship with her neighbours led to proposals for instituting the study of French and German at the University College, Ibadan’ in 1959.

The ascendancy of English over French and German in Nigeria could be explained by the institution of colonialism which made it possible for Britain to legislate on the educational content required in Nigerian schools. Perhaps the institution of colonialism also fully explains why the French and the Germans, who were in Nigeria for trade and missionary activities, failed to promote the teaching of French and German in the period covered by this study. It is important to recognise the fact that at the inception of colonialism, most Nigerians showed a willingness to learn whatever subjects they considered useful. Even during the period of colonialism, these Nigerians had continued to study languages under difficult conditions.

While it can be argued that the British were architects of the study of the English language through the examination system imported into Nigeria, and through the patronage of the certificates which were obtained from such an examination system, it seems plausible to conclude that Nigerians were responsible for keeping the French language alive for the reasons already listed above. This view considers the apathy of the French government, colonial administrators, traders and missionaries—the major agencies for the promotion of education in African countries—, the initial discouragement at examinations and the result of the increased energy put into the teaching of French since 1960, when the country became politically independent. At Ibadan University the lack of a Department within the Faculty of Arts where French is taught has been reconsidered and a Department of Modern Languages now exists along with an English Department and a Classics Department. The university has relations not only with British universities, but also with French universities, and French has become an outstanding intellectual discipline in the Nigerian educational system, providing jobs for many

53. Abiri: 56.
54. There is a need for further work on why more Nigerians learnt French than German during the colonial period.
qualified Nigerians. It must also be recognised that independence has also brought about the return of French traders, diplomats and workers; and that this has further stimulated the study of the language.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{55} Since independence, Nigerians have obtained distinctions in the School Certificate examinations, and first-class in the degree examinations. The country now boasts of Nigerians with Masters and Doctorates in the French language. English, however, remains the language of commerce and administration, and examinations are still written in English.