

A Global Evaluation of the Teaching and Learning of Yorùbá Language as a Second or Foreign Language

Akinloye Ojo
University of Georgia

1. Introduction

Yorùbá language is assuming greater socio-linguistic and socio-cultural functions at home (Nigeria) and abroad (West Africa, Europe, Americas and the Caribbean) and acquiring new speakers (of various proficiency levels) at an all time high. Yorùbá cultural values and religious beliefs continue to dominate the cultures and religions of various parts of the African Diaspora and beyond. The language has also been the subject of a significant number of theoretical and descriptive linguistic investigation at home and abroad. This suggests that there are enough linguists interested in the language. Unfortunately, the high level of interest, strength and growth has not actually translated into a high level of applied linguistic research in the acquisition of the language by non-natives.

While the level of research into the acquisition of the Yorùbá language by natives is significantly low also, there is however a better understanding of how native speakers acquire their language and gain cultural proficiency. It is therefore judicious on the part of those interested in the teaching and acquisition of Yorùbá by non-natives, either as a foreign or second language (henceforth L2), to consider this lack of research interest. The first step, in our sincere opinion, is the evaluation of the status of Yorùbá L2 teaching at home and abroad. Such an evaluation will provide a clear picture of the sources and availability of useful data for Yorùbá applied linguistic investigation.

This section brings together a collection of such reports from three regions of the world where Yorùbá L2 teaching is growing – Nigeria in Africa; France in Europe and United States of America in North America. These three countries exemplify the breakthroughs and challenges of Yorùbá L2 programming right from the issues within government language planning policies through program proposal within educational institutions up to the issues related to teaching aspects of the language, such as tones, to non-native learners. The papers in this section provide discussions of the practical experiences from Nigeria, Europe and America at the teacher training and the university levels, including the challenges of Yorùbá program pioneering at an historically black institution in the US.

2. Teaching of Yorùbá as a Second Language

The Yorùbá language is spoken natively by over thirty million people in West Africa, primarily in Nigeria and in the neighboring countries of the Republic of Benin and Togo. Varieties of Yorùbá language are also spoken in the Diaspora in places such as Cuba, Brazil, and the Caribbean. The language has been written since as early as 1800, although there have been many changes in aspects of its orthographic representation. It is a viable medium of instruction in education with a significant amount of pedagogical materials. In fact, amongst the over two thousand African languages, it is one of the most widely learnt as a second language, especially in Europe and the Americas.

As with many other African languages, there has been increased programming for non-natives in Yorùbá language and culture in recent years. For instance, the number of Yorùbá language programs in the United States of America is now in double digits compared to two decades ago when there were only a few existing programs. According to the National African Language Resource Center (NALRC), there are about eighteen fully fledged Yorùbá language programs in the country. A

contributor in this section, Tim Ajani, however reports that a recent online search for Yorùbá language courses yielded a total of thirty-nine institutions. These numbers clearly indicate growth even though they might seem to show different degrees. It must however be noted that there are Yorùbá language programs that are not associated with the NALRC and there are several US institutions that offer Yorùbá language courses without full fledged programming, either in Yorùbá or in an African language. Hence, such programs might not be listed by the NALRC.

There are many reasons for this general development in the US and all over the world. In Nigeria, one of the reasons for the growth is the implementation of the national language policy which requires every Nigerian child to learn one of the three national languages, Yorùbá, Hausa or Igbo. In the African Diaspora, Yorùbá language is spoken and learned as part of the African socio-cultural heritage of the many descendants of Africans relocated to the new world during the slave trade era. And in Europe and the rest of the world, Yorùbá language is offered as part of various foreign language educational requirements. As a matter of fact, the growth in the teaching and learning of the Yorùbá language and culture in North America (especially the US) is, among other motivations, due to both socio-cultural heritage and foreign language educational requirements (Arasanyin, Schleicher and Sekoni, 1996).

This growth goes to show that there are more opportunities for non-natives to study Yorùbá in institutions of higher learning in America. Bokamba (2002) provides a detailed historical account of the establishment and growth of programming in African languages, such as Yorùbá, in the United States of America. This account also includes the definition of programming in African languages and the various activities that have led to the creation, survival and growth of the programs. Comparatively in Nigeria, Yorùbá L2 opportunities are also growing for both educators and students. Presently, most colleges of education provide Yorùbá language programming for student-teachers who will become Yorùbá L2 teachers. At the secondary level, the National Policy on Education (NPE) has ensured the establishment of programming in Yorùbá and the two other major Nigerian languages, Hausa and Igbo.

Beyond programming, Yorùbá L2 teaching has further developed in terms of professional recognition and methodology. Universally, the teaching of Yorùbá language and culture to non-natives was not considered a viable professional career, even up to the early 1990s. It is now a strong growing and recognized professional field both at home and abroad. In fact, while the status of Yorùbá L2 teaching is not the best it could be in Nigeria presently, there are greater job opportunities in this field than in most other professional careers in the country. In foreign places on the other hand, the professional opportunities are limited but good wherever they are available. The level of professionalism in the teaching of Yorùbá and other African languages in America can be further illustrated by the existence and growth of the professional organization, African Language Teachers' Association (ALTA) with its annual conference and journal. The recognition is also apparent with the devotion of featured panels (such the one from which papers in this section were presented) to the teaching of various African languages at the Annual Conference on African Linguistics (ACAL).

As the field of Yorùbá (and African) language teaching has developed so as the formalization of the methodology for Yorùbá (and African languages) L2 teaching. A dominant methodology today is the Goal Based Approach (GBA) which enhances previous initiatives and contains principles and features applicable to African languages. Succinctly, GBA is a useful and applicable approach to African language and culture learning that tries to ensure focus on the students rather than the instructor or class schedule. Schleicher and Moshi (2000) provides a vivid description of the emergent ideology behind the formalized methodology for Yorùbá (and African languages) L2 teaching. Accordingly, they emphasize the interrelationship between L2 teaching and learning and the knowledge about language, culture, learning strategies and communication strategies.

The formalization of the methodologies in Yorùbá L2 teaching has further meant that various other needs have to be met in order to ensure continued success of the Yorùbá L2 programming. Such needs include teacher training beyond the knowledge of second language acquisition theories but into the complete preparedness for Yorùbá L2 teaching. There was also the need for Yorùbá L2 teachers and program managers (as well as learners, in fact) to recognize the relationship between the contemporary socio-political environment (of a country or institution) and the well being of the Yorùbá L2 program. In essence, Yorùbá L2 teaching becomes a comparative endeavor in which

Yorùbá language and culture is provided as a tool to a better and more productive social and political individuals.

Another need is the development of functional pedagogical materials. The developers of these materials were expected to be conversant with the L2 acquisition theories and the materials were expected to incorporate the formalized methodologies in Yorùbá L2 teaching and provide a communicative approach for the learning and teaching of Yorùbá as a L2. Overall, there was the need for Yorùbá L2 materials, possibly developed by practitioners, to enhance both the linguistic competence and cultural proficiency of the Yorùbá L2 learners. In attempting to address this need, many of the United States government's thirteen funded Language Resource Centers (LRC) have organized workshops and training programs for developers of L2 learning and teaching materials for various languages including Yorùbá and other African languages.

Ultimately, all the progress associated with the teaching of Yorùbá L2 has also brought about the study of what constitutes the identity of the Yorùbá L2 learner and their motivation both at home and abroad. In Nigeria, these tended to be mostly speakers of other Nigerian languages such as Igbo and Hausa with some Yorùbá descendants who, for various social, economic and political reasons do not possess native proficiency in the language. Abroad, the identity of the Yorùbá L2 learner has changed over time. Initially, it tended to be mostly Indo-European language speakers who have very little or no contact with the language. Over time, with the continued growth and recognition of Yorùbá L2 programs, the Yorùbá L2 learners are now a combination of three groups. First, there are still the traditional Indo-European speakers. Second are the speakers of other non-European and other African languages. The third are the Yorùbá heritage learners.

The Yorùbá heritage learners in the West are quite similar to the group of Yorùbá descendant L2 learners in Nigeria with some exceptions. The heritage learners are children of Yorùbá native speakers born in the western world, who were exposed to some Yorùbá cultural practices and values growing up in their home settings but who had never acquired any significant level of proficiency in Yorùbá language. The number of this group of learners increased tremendously in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, especially in University programs, due to the coming of age of the children of Yorùbá (and other African) immigrants who migrated to the West in high numbers in the 1980s and early 1990s. The first generation Yorùbá babies born in America are now of college age and eager to acquire the home language that they have not really had a chance to learn well.

In spite of the various differences in the identities of Yorùbá L2 learners at home and abroad, the different group of learners share indistinguishable motivations for studying Yorùbá as their foreign or second language. Arasanyin, Schleicher and Sekoni (1996) in their development of '*a goal-driven curriculum*' for the GBA provide an extensive discussion of the motivations that Yorùbá L2 learners bring to the language classroom. Some of these shared motivations include research, ethnic or racial heritage, fulfilling language requirements, interest in Yorùbá music and arts, past or ongoing personal relationships and preparing for teaching assignments and other forms of employment.

3. A Global Evaluation of the status of Yorùbá L2 Programming

It is on the basis of the above noted exceptional growth in Yorùbá L2 programming at home and abroad that brought about the convening of the featured language panel from which the articles featured in this section were presented. The goals of the panel were four-fold. First, it was to bring together three major groups interested in the teaching and learning of Yorùbá by non-native speakers for tangible exchange of ideas. These specialized groups are the teachers of Yorùbá as a second language (L2) in Nigeria; the teachers of Yorùbá as a foreign language elsewhere; and the applied linguists working on the acquisition of Yorùbá by non-natives. The second goal was the consideration of some of the breakthroughs and challenges in the teaching and study of Yorùbá as a second language at home (in Nigeria) and abroad (in Europe and America).

The third goal of the featured panel was to identify the effects of the changing world environment via globalization on the Yorùbá learning environment or situation at home and abroad. Finally, the fourth goal of the panel was to produce a series of status report on the breakthroughs and challenges facing Yorùbá L2 teachers and researchers in their specified region and areas of interest. It was our hope in conveying the panel that these discussions will provide some background for the consideration

of the important question of why the increased interest and growth in the study of Yorùbá L2 has not translated into a high level of applied linguistic research in the acquisition of Yorùbá by non-natives at home and abroad.

3.1. *A Collection of Papers as Status Reports*

The papers presented in this section are reflective of the different expectations that each presenter on the panel of Yorùbá L2 specialist was compelled to meet in relation to their area of expertise and locality. Among others, each contributor was expected to identify the growth, if any, in the teaching and learning of Yorùbá by non-natives within their locality and type of institution. They were also to consider the breakthroughs and challenges facing teachers, researchers and even language planning policy makers in their respective geographic region of the world. In addition, it was suggested that the contributors could, if they so wishes, illustrate all discussions with their own professional or research experiences or the experiences of other Yorùbá L2 teachers or researchers within their identified region. The presentations from the four of the panelists from Nigeria, Europe and the United States of America are presented in this section.

In the opening paper, Olanike Ola Orie from Tulane University discusses some of the issues and challenges of Yorùbá L2 acquisition by both heritage learners and academic learners. She narrows her discussion to the great difficulty that native speakers of non-tonal native languages face in their attempt to acquire Yorùbá, a tonal language. She identified three of these universal challenges as the lack of sensitivity to tonal categories, the interference from first language (L1) features and the differences in hemispheric processing of tones. In her discussion thereafter, Orie highlights the global challenges with tone acquisition faced by both native and non-native learners with special focus on the specific challenges encountered by native speakers of English. Finally, she outlined strategies that can help these learners improve their Yorùbá tone perception and production.

The second paper addresses some of the challenges and impediments that exist in the establishment of Yorùbá L2 programs in the United States. The paper by Timothy Ajani of Fayetteville State University (FSU) outlines the processes and stages that the Yorùbá L2 program proposal went through before finally being approved at FSU. The ironic aspect of this paper is the fact that FSU is a Historically Black University (HBCU), a segment of the American university system that should, for apparent historical reasons, warmly embrace African language programming, especially Yorùbá. This point was noted by Ajani as he presents the different arguments that were made to contend against the establishment of an African language program in an academic institution with celebrated African heritage.

Another point that Ajani's paper highlights is that most Yorùbá (and other African languages) scholars would agree, in all fairness, that the HBCUs have not received their due attention in the expansion and development efforts of such professional language organizations such as ALTA. According to him, the appreciable growth in African language programming in the United States in the past three decades have actually been concentrated in the majority White institutions, the flagship state Universities and the elitist Ivy League institutions. Ajani concludes with a strong optimistic assertion that new Yorùbá (and African) language programs can be established, even in the face of cultural, ideological and curricular challenges, as long as the identified elementary principles are adhered to faithfully. Furthermore, as evidenced in the presentation, this feat of pioneering Yorùbá as a foreign language can also be achieved in the HBCUs in America.

The focus shifts in the third paper from America to the situation in Europe. Focusing on the developments at his home institution, the *Institut National des Langue et Civilisations Orientales* (INALCO) in France, George Alao discusses some of the achievements, challenges and perspectives of teaching Yorùbá in a changing Europe. INALCO's uniqueness, according to Alao can be perceived in the institution's guiding principle of language offering which goes beyond politics and militarism but focuses on the need for knowing about the 'Other.' This principle has allowed for the teaching of Yorùbá for two decades, along with ninety other less commonly taught languages, in one of the comparatively oldest African Studies department on the continent.

In evaluating the status of Yorùbá L2 teaching and learning in INALCO, Alao focuses on the needs and motivations of the learner, the background and challenges facing the teacher and the

evolution of teaching materials and how these have shaped the methodology. The ongoing socio-political changes in Europe, particularly with the formation of the European Union (EU), have brought Eurocentric ideals and harmonization process. According to Alao, an example of these is the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* that is being suggested as a tool to harmonize regional language programs in the EU. The paper discusses some of the implications of this harmonization on the teaching of African languages in Europe and outlines strategies for the teaching and learning of Yorùbá and other African languages in the new Europe.

The final paper in the collection presents a discussion of the issues and challenges facing Yorùbá L2 programming in Nigeria. While each of the papers focuses on the contents and issues related to the language policy in the often reviewed Nigerian Policy on Education (NPE), they both present in-depth discussion of the circumstances at two different levels of education; teacher training colleges and secondary schools. Incongruously, these two types of institutions are the only ones with Yorùbá L2 programs in Nigeria. None of the Nigerian Universities or technical colleges offers Yorùbá L2 programming. In fact, some members of the panel are in the process of working with some of the Universities in the Yorùbá speaking area, Southwestern Nigeria, to develop Yorùbá L2 programs.

The final paper in the collection presents a discussion of the issues and challenges facing Yorùbá L2 programming in Nigeria. The paper focuses on the contents and issues related to the language policy in the often reviewed Nigerian Policy on Education (NPE) and presents in-depth discussion of the circumstances at the teacher training colleges. Incongruously, these teacher training institutions and the secondary schools are the only educational establishments with Yorùbá L2 programs in Nigeria. None of the Nigerian Universities or technical colleges offers Yorùbá L2 programming. In fact, some members of the panel are in the process of working with some of the Universities in the Yorùbá speaking area, Southwestern Nigeria, to develop Yorùbá L2 programs.

The paper by Professor Oyewole Arohunmolase of the Adeyemi College of Education in Ondo State of Nigeria discusses the problems and prospects of the teaching and learning Yorùbá L2 in Nigeria against the background of the ongoing global spread of Yorùbá L2 programming. Arohunmolase highlights the dual roles of Yorùbá in Education in Nigeria and considers the effects of Nigeria's multilingualism on the language and the students in the classroom. He discusses the contents of the language policy within the various revisions of the NPE. Based on these discussions, he examines some of the challenges facing both Yorùbá L2 educators and their trainers in implementing the contents of the NPE within the school curriculum.

References

- Yorùbá LTF of the African Language Teachers' Association (ALTA). Yorùbá language learning framework: guide for teachers and students.
- Arasanyin, Olaoba F., Antonia, Y. F. Schleicher, and Ropo Sekoni. 1996. A goal-driven curriculum. Washington, D.C.: NFLC, John Hopkins.
- Bokamba, Eyamba. 2002. African language program development and administration: A history and guidelines for future programs. Madison, Wisconsin: NALRC Press.
- Dwyer, David, Antonia Y. F. Schleicher and Lioba Moshi. 1997. The role of culture in the language classroom. The design of African language programs, ed. by David Dwyer, 45-58, Boston: Mother Tongue Editions.
- Moshi, Lioba. 2001. Content based instruction for African languages. *Journal of African Language Learning and Teaching* 1.1.89-112.
- Ojo, Akinloye. 2005. Meeting students' expectations in an African language program within Euro-American academic institutions. *Journal of Contemporary Educational Issues* 2.42-54.
- Ojo, Akinloye. 2003. Achieving successful Yorùbá language instruction: the beginners' class. *Journal of African Language Teachers Association* 4.1. 43-60
- Ojo, Akinloye. 2002. The challenges and methodologies of African language instruction in the West/United States. Lagos: Adeniran Ogunsanya College of Education Press.
- Ojo, Akinloye. 1998. The interlanguage of a second language learner of Yorùbá: a single case study. *Research in African Languages and Literature* 4.1. 41-52.
- Ojo, Akinloye. Yorùbá language learning framework: guide for students.' In Yorùbá LTF report for the African Language Teachers Association (ALTA).
- Schleicher, Antonia and Lioba Moshi. 2000. The pedagogy of African languages: an emerging field. Ohio: NEALRC.

Selected Proceedings of the 36th Annual Conference on African Linguistics: Shifting the Center of Africanism in Language Politics and Economic Globalization

edited by Olaoba F. Arasanyin
and Michael A. Pemberton

Cascadilla Proceedings Project Somerville, MA 2006

Copyright information

Selected Proceedings of the 36th Annual Conference on African Linguistics:
Shifting the Center of Africanism in Language Politics and Economic Globalization
© 2006 Cascadilla Proceedings Project, Somerville, MA. All rights reserved

ISBN 1-57473-414-8 library binding

A copyright notice for each paper is located at the bottom of the first page of the paper.
Reprints for course packs can be authorized by Cascadilla Proceedings Project.

Ordering information

Orders for the library binding edition are handled by Cascadilla Press.
To place an order, go to www.lingref.com or contact:

Cascadilla Press, P.O. Box 440355, Somerville, MA 02144, USA
phone: 1-617-776-2370, fax: 1-617-776-2271, e-mail: sales@cascadilla.com

Web access and citation information

This entire proceedings can also be viewed on the web at www.lingref.com. Each paper has a unique document # which can be added to citations to facilitate access. The document # should not replace the full citation.

This paper can be cited as:

Ojo, Akinloye. 2006. A Global Evaluation of the Teaching and Learning of Yorùbá Language as a Second or Foreign Language. In *Selected Proceedings of the 36th Annual Conference on African Linguistics*, ed. Olaoba F. Arasanyin and Michael A. Pemberton, 116-120. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project.

or:

Ojo, Akinloye. 2006. A Global Evaluation of the Teaching and Learning of Yorùbá Language as a Second or Foreign Language. In *Selected Proceedings of the 36th Annual Conference on African Linguistics*, ed. Olaoba F. Arasanyin and Michael A. Pemberton, 116-120. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project.
www.lingref.com, document #1414.