AFRICAN LANGUAGE PROGRAM (ALP) IN JAPAN: POSITION AND AGENDA FOR CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

The significant global, economic and political changes in the late 1990s have been the motive behind the introduction of foreign language teaching and learning in many countries across the world. In Japan, the successful post-war economy and her relationship with other countries partly influenced her language policy in tune with globalization and socio-economic demands. This paper takes a critical look at the current state of the African language programme (ALP) in Japan. We conclude that African languages have not enjoyed much investment, efforts, and resources in Japan when compared to other foreign language studies.

INTRODUCTION

The paper is divided into four parts. The first part presents a brief historical account of the language situation in Japan in the past and reasons for the review of the nation's language policy. An overview of the contemporary language policy within the context of foreign language education is discussed in section two. The focus of the third section is on current practices in the teaching of African languages and criticism. Recommendations and proposals are given in section four.

To underscore the increasing significance of foreign language learning in a global context, Japan now places emphasis on multilingualism and intercultural communication. Prior to the late 1990s, when efforts on language reforms began, the focal point of Japan's language policy was the protection of her language against what was then referred to as potentially overwhelming foreign influence. As Caroll (2001) corroborates this view by observing that "the Japanese language was seen as a symbol of Japanese unity and culture but the crisis of confidence suffered by some of the country's institutions, which hitherto were considered 'safe and indestructible,' and formed the very foundations of post-war Japan, later changed this posture" (p.68).

There are two phases of language reforms in Japan. These can be classified into (i) the 1960s to 1980s and (ii) the 1990s and beyond. The latter phase is more relevant to the current discourse as the policy formulated during this period has a broader perspective, with its consideration of certain sociolinguistic factors such as language use and the international society, the impact of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT), language education and research, and their impacts on the Japanese society. The realisation that generally there is a trend towards internationalisation and the change of society's needs are factors for promoting foreign languages by the government of Japan. The increasing number of migrant workers, especially from South-eastern Asia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and the Philippines, during the years of economic boom, and their contact and interaction with the Japanese society also contributed to this new sociolinguistic reality. As time passed by, the younger generation became more liberal than older generation for whom languages of other nations have a different significance. Consequently, there was a change in the linguistic and

social behaviour of this crop of younger citizens referred to as *Shinjinrui* (new breed), a term coined to describe the 'social personality' of the younger generation (Nakano, 1988, p. 14).

Language Policy and Foreign Language Education

There are three separate but interdependent bodies responsible for language-policy making and implementation in Japan. They are: the National Language Research Institute (NLRI/*Kokuritsu Kokugo Kankyujo*), the National Language Deliberative Council (NLDC/*Kokugo Shingikai)* and the National Language Section (NLS/*Kokugoka)*. These agencies operate under the ambit of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, Sports and Technology (*Monbusho*). Though each of these institutions has specific roles in the formulation and implementation of language policies, there is a degree of interaction and interdependence between them. While the NLRI, for instance, is the research arm of the Ministry, the NLDC makes the policy, and the NLS administers and implements it.

The language planning process in Japan is heavily influenced by the socio-cultural and economic changes that started around the 1990s. The notion that the use of Japanese is limited to international communication is one of the factors for adopting a multilingual model policy. The young people's language, it was argued, is changing in this direction and language planning must attempt to reflect the general direction of change in linguistic behaviour.

Monbusho formulates national educational standards for all school levels, from kindergarten to upper secondary, for the realisation of educational goals based on the principle of equal educational opportunity for all. The basic framework for the curricula at these levels is provided in the *Enforcement Regulations for the School Education Law,* where the guidelines, objectives, and content of each subject are specified. These provisions are based on the recommendations of the Curriculum Council, and each school is expected to design its curricula based on the spirit of the education law and their peculiar circumstances taking into consideration the needs of the community and the mental and physical challenges of the pupils.

Though many elementary schools now teach foreign languages (especially English), formal foreign language education starts from the lower secondary school (grades 7, 8, and 9). The teaching of English is compulsory at this level, while other foreign languages are elective. At the upper secondary school (grades 10, 11, and 12), other foreign languages such as Chinese, French, German, Spanish, among others, are also elective. The revised course of study at this level has seven components of English. They are: English I, English II, Aural/Oral Communication A, Aural/Oral Communication B, Aural/ Oral Communication C, Reading, and Writing. However, in the two-year junior college programme, all foreign languages including English are elective. At the university level, the course a student wants to study is taking into consideration before studying a foreign language either as a required course or an elective.

Presently, there is an increase in the varieties of foreign language studied in Japan but English remains the most popular. Historically, Chinese has been the most influential foreign language in Japan as the country's writing system is based on Kanji, which are Chinese characters, but the strained relationship between the two countries, which just witnessed some processes of restoration, almost put an end to this. Japan's recent preference

for English is in connection with her business interests in Europe and America where the English language is dominant. As Hall (1971) elucidates, Japan's post-war alliance with the United States of America, which dates back to 1945, after the Second World War, when it had to align her interest with Western countries, and established trade and political relations with them, contributed to the popularity being enjoyed by English (p.12).

The interest shown in the study of English has led to the establishment of many English language schools for formal and/or private education. Japanese companies doing business overseas nowadays engaged their staff in the learning of English. A number of English language proficiency tests such as TOEFL, United Nations Association's Test of English, Cambridge Examination in English as a Foreign Language, among others, are now being offered. In 2001, for instance, the National Institute for Educational Policy Research records that about 2 million people sat for these English proficiency tests.

African Languages in Japan

It is a fact that foreign language education receives municipal support in Japan. But out of over 60 government-owned conventional universities, only Osaka University (less than 2%) offers African languages. In this university, the teaching of African languages commenced in 1992, when it was then known as Osaka University of Foreign Studies before its integration into Osaka University in 2007.

Apart from Osaka University, there is the Research Institute for the Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa (ILCAA) established in 1964 and affiliated to Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. It is the mission of the Institute to implement and stimulate research on languages, linguistics, history of Asia and Africa and sponsor intensive courses in Asian and African languages.

But a scrutiny of the operations of ILCAA revealed that it is research-oriented and does not teach African languages. In the Institute, there is a wide-range of on-going government sponsored field works and researches on African languages whose results are at times never published. Many of the researchers too are not in universities or research institutions, where the result of their researches can be applied or use for the purposes of language development.

The Research Institute for World Languages (RIWL) is the arm of Osaka University that handles foreign language teaching and research. The mission of the Institute is to strengthen studies of world languages through research, as well as responding to the needs of globalization and the Japanese society. Presently, about twenty-seven foreign languages that fall under six research departments are taught. The languages are the following: Arabic, Burmese, Chinese, Danish, English, French, German, Hausa, Hindi, Hungarian, Indonesian, Italian, Kiswahili, Korean, Lingala, Mongolian, Persian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Swedish, Thai, Turkey, Urdu, Vietnamese, Yoruba and Zulu. While some of these languages are full-fledged courses, others are just programmes. As for ALs, students can only offer Kiswahili as a full degree program. Lingala, Zulu, Hausa and Yoruba, which are other ALs studied in the university are programmes housed in Kiswahili Department and apart from Yoruba which is a required course for Kiswahili students, other ALs are electives. By this arrangement, second year students of Kiswahili are also required to offer Elementary Yoruba while Intermediate Yoruba is taught in the third year. A fourth year

Kiswahili major is also expected to study Advanced Yoruba before graduation. In these languages, the areas of study are: reading, grammar, composition and conversation.

Curriculum and Instructional Strategies

In Japan, the overall objectives of FLs programs are fairly adequate. They are:

i) developing students' abilities to understand a foreign language and express themselves in it;
ii) developing a positive attitude toward communicating in it;
iii) heightening interest in language and culture, deepening international understanding.

The specific objectives of each AL itself are fairly related to the overall objectives and are defined in terms of the four basic language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. The processes employed and the tools embraced for teaching are the impediments facing the realization of these objectives. Others include shortage of qualified staff, conservative and ineffective instructional strategies, and the use of geriatric texts.

In the AL classroom in Osaka University, the models of instructional strategies in modern language learning are before now non-existent. The method employed by instructors is largely the read-repeat (RR) approach which is sometimes monotonous. And due to insufficient communicative skills, students during conversational exercises only recite what they have memorized. The selection of and the effective use of any appropriate form of delivery depend on the instructor, given the circumstances of his environment and the ability of students. It is important that whatever strategy or method the instructor adopts should give students the opportunity to extend their learning both inside and outside the classroom. In all, motivational techniques are important for motivating students to learn a foreign/second language.

In the Yoruba classroom, the teaching processes provide no meaningful activities that engage learners into achieving goal-oriented communication in solving problems, complete projects, and reach decisions. Comprehensive reading method is only adopted for teaching as methods such as Translation and the Task-Based Instruction (TBI), which are effective methods of language teaching are not utilized. The importance of TBI as a method for language teaching cannot be overemphasized. As Pica (2008) observes, tasks can be used for a broad range of instructional purposes, serving, for example, "as units of course syllabi, activities for structure or function practice, and language focusing enhancements to content-based curricula" (p. 72). In TBI, goals are attained for the designed tasks through linguistic and communicative precision or the use of specific grammatical forms. In this approach, students can work in pairs or groups as they carry out specific tasks that demand their attention and comprehension.

As mentioned earlier, students are not exposed to adequate basic interpersonal communication skills since conversational interactions are done within the text-only environment. It is interesting to know that the only available text for Yoruba language teaching was written in 1995 and has limited social information without any pictorial illustration. The text is inadequate for teaching. The almost non-existence of audio-visual or multimedia materials, which should have served as mechanical aids and adjuncts to teaching, has made learning ineffective and uninteresting. In the absence of computer-mediated communication programs, which are still in their exploratory phases, textbooks

having pictorial illustrations and audio-visually contextualized materials would have been useful for conversational proficiency, one of the objectives of language teaching.

There is no doubt that computer-mediated communication (CMC) assists learners to communicate with others in the target language. This is a multimodal, often but not exclusively internet-mediated communication. The use of synchronous CMC commonly referred to as chat, forms the basis for a number of second language acquisition. Guarda (2012) posits that communication in CMC is a motivating factor for learners as it facilitates active participation in interpersonal communication (p.5). But generally, there is a limitation for web-assisted communication practice in most African languages. This perhaps explains why substantial resources have not been devoted to exploring this technology agenda. With a lot of social information about Africa available on the internet, the CMC has been found to be difficult for interpersonal exchange in most African languages as a result of lack of adequate software in them. In addition to this, compulsory notations and diacritics which are compulsory for a language like Yoruba make the task more arduous for learners. However, the University has succeeded in funding and producing a Yoruba-Japanese online dictionary to help the students in the area of terminology.

Language Study Abroad (LSA)/Acculturation

Foreign language learning in a study abroad (SA) is a crucial program which assists students in attaining intermediate or high level of functional proficiency in the target language. A semester programme at home (AH), involving formal course work, excursions and residing with local host families in a native speaking area where the standard language is used no doubt raises the proficiency of students. As laudable as this program is, it has not been introduced as a requirement for graduation for ALs in Japan.

Second language learning in some respects involves the acquisition of a second identity. Brown (1986) introduced the concept of language ego to capture the deeply seated affective nature of second language learning, stressing the necessity for permeable ego boundaries in order to successfully overcome the trauma of second language learning (p.36). Strong emphasis is placed on affective characteristics of second language learning because of the highly social context of language. Second language learning has often been described therefore as second culture learning.

In considering the relationship between second language learning and second culture learning, it is very important to consider several different types of second language learning contexts. Following Brown (1986), two contexts have been identified. The first is the learning of a second language within the culture of that second language for example, a Japanese learning the Yoruba language at Ibadan, Nigeria. Second, is what is technically called foreign language learning- that is, learning a non-native language in one's own culture with rare opportunities to use the language within the environment of one's own culture (for example learning Yoruba in Japan).

Each type of second language situation involves different degrees of acculturation and approaches. Second language learning in a foreign culture, as we have in the first category, involves the deepest form of acculturation as the learner has to survive within a strange culture as well as learn a language on which he is totally dependent for communication. The foreign language context comes with various degrees of acculturation as people have various reasons for learning a foreign language. These may include: communicating with the

owners of the language someday, fulfilling a foreign language requirement in a university or gaining reading knowledge within a field of specialization, for curiosity or general interest etc. Generally, however, the foreign language situation is more culturally loaded than the second language learning in the native culture, since the language is almost always learned in a context of understanding the people of another culture.

Between societies of greatly differing socio-economic structures such as Nigeria and Japan for instance, intercultural differences play a significant role when members of the one culture learn the language of the other (such as Japanese students learning Yoruba as a foreign language). A Japanese student, for example, needs to acquire a new social experience when he has to learn how to welcome an acquaintance in Yoruba. The Yoruba social experience of welcoming someone entails a litany of expressions which might easily demand a few minutes. The welcoming process in Japanese language has shrunk to short expressions such as: 'Konichiwa' or 'Hi!', a greeting of the hybrids. A Yoruba, however, must develop a whole ritual in his mother tongue to communicate the same intention. He will have to ask about the total well being of almost all the family members of the person he is greeting or welcoming. Thus, a Japanese will have to learn not only this formula, but even more important, that the initial greeting is of great consequence to a Yoruba before delving into core issues of visit. The same is true of everyday language actions such as congratulating someone, saying good-bye, excusing oneself, and expressing anger or happiness.

In comparison to societies, in which social life centers around the family (i.e. a community of several generations of relatives often living under the same roof and often barely subsisting), the linguistic exponents of these actions that occur in industrialized countries are emotionally subdued and functionalized. Students from industrial countries, therefore, must acquire ways of dealing with others socially and emotionally, more especially if they want to communicate successfully in an African language.

Evaluation

The traditional convention for designating domains of language assessment comprehensively has been to assess the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. Usually, each of these skills is assessed through batteries of tests. This approach has been known to convey a sense of comprehensiveness about students' abilities to perform across a range of oral/aural and literate mode of communication. Distinctions are also made between receptive (reading and listening) and productive (writing and speaking) modes of communication. Further distinctions are made between subcomponents of knowledge or performance associated with each skill domain, for instance, pronunciation, intonation and fluency for speaking; or grammar, vocabulary, and discourse functions for reading. All these have become so entrenched as the foundation for language education throughout the world that most accounts of language assessment, policy, or pedagogy are, to some extent, framed in respect to them. Given this background therefore, one can conclude that the purpose of most language education is to develop students' general capacities to use a language in a multidimensional range of oral and literate activities.

With the situation in the AL classroom painted in 3.1 above, one then wonders if judgment or decisions on students' language abilities can be effectively accomplished as measurement tasks. Personally, we do not see any true score waiting to be approximated.

Strategies for Sustaining and Enhancing ALP

The experience that has informed the writing of this paper shows that the success and improvement of ALP in Japan depends on two critical factors under which other sub-factors are subsumed. The first is the realization by administrators and/or implementers of foreign language education policy that much still need to be done for African languages. The second, which logically follows the first, is the commitment and genuine efforts to make the goals of foreign language study realizable. The nexus between these two factors is fundamental for any prospect for any agenda for change.

There is no doubt that improvement in the quality of instruction will constitute an aspect of program consolidation. Production of adequate and appropriate teaching materials such as readers, learners' grammar, and dictionaries to supplement existing published texts which will respond to students' study needs is also quite desirable for the success of the program. Tremendous stride should be made in the production of pedagogical materials of different types including but not limited to audio-visual materials, i.e. CD-Roms, video tapes etc.

There is a need for staffs who are natives or near-native speakers of the languages. In a situation where such professionally qualified instructors are not available, GTAs who meet the target language proficiency requirements can be hired. Such staff should be exposed to further training in the context of sponsorship to relevant conferences or workshops. They can also benefit from on-the-job training. The overtly discriminatory hiring practices of staff on the basis of extra-nationality or for other reasons unrelated to professionalism should be dispensed with. Many Japanese universities in recent years have abolished their foreign staff positions. In universities, where such positions still exist, they refer to such staff as language instructors with temporary or contract positions which offer little possibility for tenure positions. This situation might not encourage foreign language staff to take up full-time appointments. The result of which is the shortage of staff as being witnessed presently.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have tried to critically appraise African language program in Japan. The paper gave a brief historical background of the beginning of foreign language education in the country vis-à-vis the educational and language policy of the country.

The rapid development of the global information and communication infrastructure, the internalization of society, and the globalization of economies, have made people in various regions of the world to be involved in learning languages other than their native language as we have seen in Japan. But in the paper, we have established that generally speaking, African languages have not received adequate attention in Japan. In the only institution, where a few ALs are offered, commensurate expert leadership in language teaching, effective programming and administration, and relevant pedagogical materials are lacking. These are serious limitations that may affect the sustainability of the program. Rather than focusing primarily on teaching of these languages, administrators of African language program are more concerned with research and theoretical construction and linguistic description of African languages.

There is no doubt that language and cultural understanding can also strengthen the bilateral relations between Japan and many African countries. The volume of trade between Japan on the one hand, and these countries in Africa on the other, has continued to grow and has

contributed to the investment being made between them which provides the basis for future cooperation. Furthermore, Japan with its strong social and economic institutions needs to understand the people of Africa better through this type of program in order to be able to help in finding solutions to the environmental and social problems of Africa as part of her foreign programs.

Finally, the strategic reforms recommended in the paper if adopted will give African language program a leap and will enhance the goal attainment of foreign language education in general and African language studies in particular.

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