

Incorporating Language Learning Into the Academic Setting: A Practical Example at Harvard University

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Abstract

There has been a growing interest in the learning of African languages in US institutions in recent years. Students learn these languages for various reasons: to fulfill academic requirements, to connect with their heritage, to undertake academic research and learn to help them understand materials in an academic course they are taking. To make this process meaningful to learners, there is a need to integrate language learning into academic disciplines. However, this is one area which has received little attention in an African language syllabus at the university level. There abound areas in African language learning which can be made meaningful to its students within the university academic arena. This paper describes how the African Languages Program at Harvard University collaborated with a professor of Anthropology to teach the course *Delimiting health disparities in the African Diaspora: A Laboratory for social Engagement*. This involved twenty-two students in three African languages (Akan -Twi, Dinka, and Wolof) as well as Haitian Creole.

Introduction

Language teaching and learning has over the years undergone considerable metamorphosis. The changes have been underpinned by the objectives for teaching and learning a language. Language teaching in the 20th Century was characterized by frequent changes in motivation and by the development of competing language teaching methods (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). This has resulted in the orchestration of numerous language teaching methods. Each method professes to be more effective and theoretically sound than the methods before it. There have been ef

forts to make language learning less stressful and more meaningful to students. Language learning becomes meaningful, interesting and motivating to learners when they perceive real value for it in their academic endeavors. Students want to use their L2 to talk about their academic area of specialization, do research, make comparisons, and/or make connections by accessing information available solely in the L2. Language learning should contribute to the overall academic success of students. One method in language teaching which empowers learners to be independent and adhere to the needs of learners' entire education is Content-Based Instruction (CBI). This is a method of second language teaching which is organized around content which learners will acquire rather than being based upon linguistic content (Ibid). Although this language teaching method has been proven to be effective, it has not caught up with Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTLs). For example, Swahili has been with American universities for a while, but little effort has been made by the university academic setting to integrate it into teaching other academic disciplines. A great service would be done to African language learners, and more generally Less Commonly Taught Language (LCTL) learners if language learning is integrated into other non-language courses they learn. There abounds in many academic disciplines like anthropology, history, public health, business, economics, science, literature, content which African languages can be utilized to make meaningful to language learners, especially if it has an African focus. African language teaching and learning should be taken to this new level to make it meaningful to learners in the other academic endeavors.

Content-Based Instruction (CBI)

Definition

The use of content-based Instruction in second language teaching began in earnest in the 1980s. Interest in integrating language and content increased dramatically after Mohan's seminal book *Language and content* appeared in 1986 (Snow & Brinton,

1997) This approach to language teaching, according to Grabe and Stoller, 1997, is used for both L1 and L2 learning. CBI is the integration of L2 teaching with instruction in the content areas. The L2 is used as a medium for teaching subject content from the regular classroom (Curtain & Haas, 1995). In the CBI method, language is not just a medium of communication but a medium of learning across the curriculum. Brinton (2006) indicates that CBI involves the concurrent learning of a specific content and related language use skills in a “content driven” curriculum, i.e. the selection and sequence of language elements determined by the content. This definition does not see language learning as the acquisition of isolated grammatical structures but as communicative behavior linked with content. CBI ensures that language learning is about something rather than learning about language (Davis, 2003). It is “... an approach to language instruction that integrates the presentation of topics or tasks from subject matter classes (e.g. math, social studies) within the context of teaching a second or foreign language” (Crandall & Tucker, 1990, p. 187). These classic definitions emphasize the integration of language and content with second language learning purpose. Genesee (1994) indicates that content “...need not be academic; it can include any topic, theme, or non-language issue of interest or importance to the learners” (p. 3). The question so far not answered by the literature on CBI is how language and content learning can be integrated with content learning purpose. This is the nature of the CBI approach described in this paper. CBI comprises models like sheltered, adjunct and theme-based.

Rationale for using CBI

The use of any second language method has a rationale. CBI as a method for teaching L2 is underpinned by the rationale that: (Brinton, Snow & Wesche, 1989; Grabe & Stoller, 1997) Learners are exposed to comprehensible meaningful input which serves the needs of learners. Learners are exposed to considerable amount of language while learning content. The learners are engaged in appropriate language use which does not make language

learning artificial and meaningless exercises. The CBI curriculum caters to the interests and needs of the learners.

- CBI supports contextual learning. Language learned is appropriate to the context rather than to isolated social incidents. It incorporates the eventful uses the learners will make of the target language.
- CBI makes use of the learner's previous learning experience. There is increased opportunity to use the content knowledge and the expertise students bring to the language classroom. Students use their prior knowledge to learn additional language and content.
- CBI increases students' motivation because there is immediate gratification for the use of the language being learned.
- CBI supports natural kinds of language learning approaches like cooperative language learning, experiential learning, and project-based learning.
- CBI curriculum and activity sequencing have greater flexibility and adaptability. Language teachers using this method can incorporate additional subtopics and have more opportunity to adjust, depending on change in interest and needs of learners.
- CBI supports student-centered classroom activity. Students have the opportunity to make choices and preferences in terms of specific content and learning activities.
- CBI creates more favorable attitude towards second language learning. Students are more likely to continue with learning the language or other languages.
- CBI makes a long term investment in students in terms of language learning.

Challenges of using CBI

There is not a single known second language teaching method without a challenge. Content-based instruction is no exception.

The use of CBI in second language teaching, especially in African languages programs, is faced with the following challenges:

- CBI is found to be tasking on the teachers since they need to have knowledge of the content to be able to use the appropriate language. It is difficult to use in African languages programs in universities where teaching assistants (TAs) are used as the primary instructors.
- CBI is difficult to use in most African language programs since most language teachers lack the training to use this method in language teaching.
- CBI is difficult to use in beginners' classes where students have limited or no working understanding of the target language.

There is a problem with funding since instructors need to do extra work which needs compensation.

Planning for CBI

According to Curtain and Haas (1995), the key to a successful implementation of CBI is planning. Curtain and Haas list the following as hints for CBI users:

- Familiarize yourself with the content students are learning.
- Have an advance elaborate plan to do the integration and implementation.
- Promote the integration of language, content and culture.
- Plan interesting activities that accommodate students' prior knowledge and personal experience, and group learning activities.
- Use holistic strategies that integrate listening, speaking, reading and writing.
- Challenge the students to think.

Stryker and Leaver (1997) also note that a successful CBI depends on cooperation between students and teachers and among students themselves. They add that the quality of CBI hinges on

proper sequencing. Quality language teachers also play a role in CBI success. In view of this, Brinton, Snow and Wesche (2006) indicate that there should be adequately trained instructors and proper balance between language and content.

*The Harvard University African Languages Program
(HUALP)*

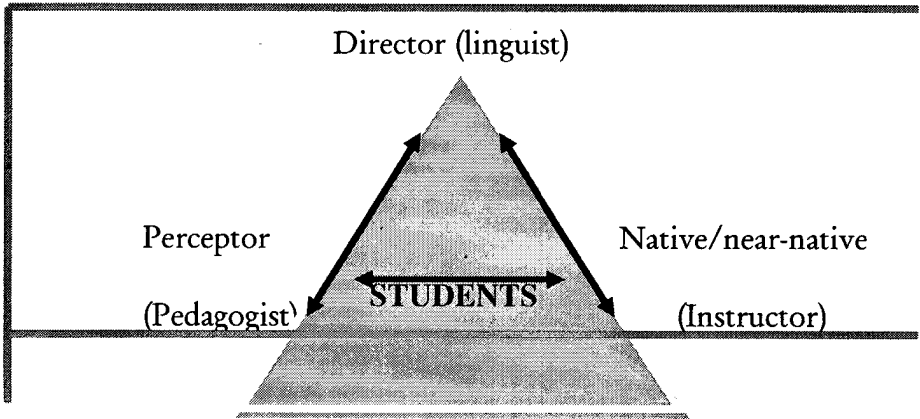
The teaching of African Languages has been on the timetable of HU for some time but the interest to teach and learn African languages became intense in the 2002/2003 academic year when it hired a full time professor to direct the African Languages Program (ALP). The African Languages Program at HU is in the Department of African and African American Studies. For the purpose of this paper, the writer will look at the African languages program from the 2002/2003 academic year, since there was no African language being studied before this time. The ALP program started with six languages (Swahili, Akan - Twi, Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba and Xhosa) with forty-six students. Since then, the program has grown steadily in the number of languages offered and in enrollment. By fall 2007/2008, the program had 17 languages offered with 170 students. Most students enrolled in the program are undergraduates with a few graduates and professors. Currently, the ALP offers 20 languages (Akan-Twi, Amharic, Bamanakan, Chechewa, Haitian Creole, Cape Verdean Creole, Dinka, Egyptian Hierographic, Gikuyu, Hausa, Igbo, Kinyarwanda, Luganda, Oromo, Pulaar, Swahili, Wolof, Xhosa and Zulu) with about 186 students. Besides these languages, the ALP at HU has offered Cameroonian Creole, Kamba, Kikongo, Malagasi, Osikwanyama, Rutooro, Sesotho, Sudanese Arabic, and Tigrinya since the program inception in 2003. Each of these languages counts as a Faculty of Arts and Sciences language requirement. The ALP at HU has four languages (Swahili, Igbo, Yoruba, and Akan) at the core which have students at all levels up to the advanced level. Most of the other languages have students at the intermediate level.

The HUALP Model

The HUALP program is student-driven. This means students' expression of interest to learn a particular language determines the number of languages to be offered in any particular year. A language is offered when there are at least two students expressing interest to learn the language. On rare and unusual cases, some languages are offered with one student. The HUALP program is able to cater to the varied language needs of students because it has developed a data base of native speakers capable of teaching the various African languages within the Greater Boston Area. Besides, the department has the financial capability to hire instructors to cater for these students. The rapid success of the ALP at HU has depended on its organization and unparalleled support from the African and African American Studies Department and the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS). The program is able to offer professional language teaching in many African languages because of its organization. It has a director who is a linguist, a language preceptor who is a pedagogist and a native or near native speaker who is the instructor. With the exception of Swahili, Twi and Igbo, all instructors are paid according to the number of students they teach. One will be tempted to argue that instructors will inflate grades to get more students in their language classes but the program has put structures in place to curb such tendencies. The program believes that an educated native/near native speaker can teach a language when given the pedagogic and linguistic guidance. There is therefore a weekly instructors' meeting where pedagogic and linguistic problems are addressed. Language instructors are taught material development, language assessment, language teaching skills, classroom management and much more. In addition to this, students continuously evaluate their teachers by writing weekly reports about what transpires in class every week. These weekly reports are read and discussed with instructors at their weekly meetings. This is used as a remedial plan to correct what is not working for

our students and as a means of putting instructors in L2 teaching shape. This is the model of the HU language program.

Fig. 1: *The HUALP model*



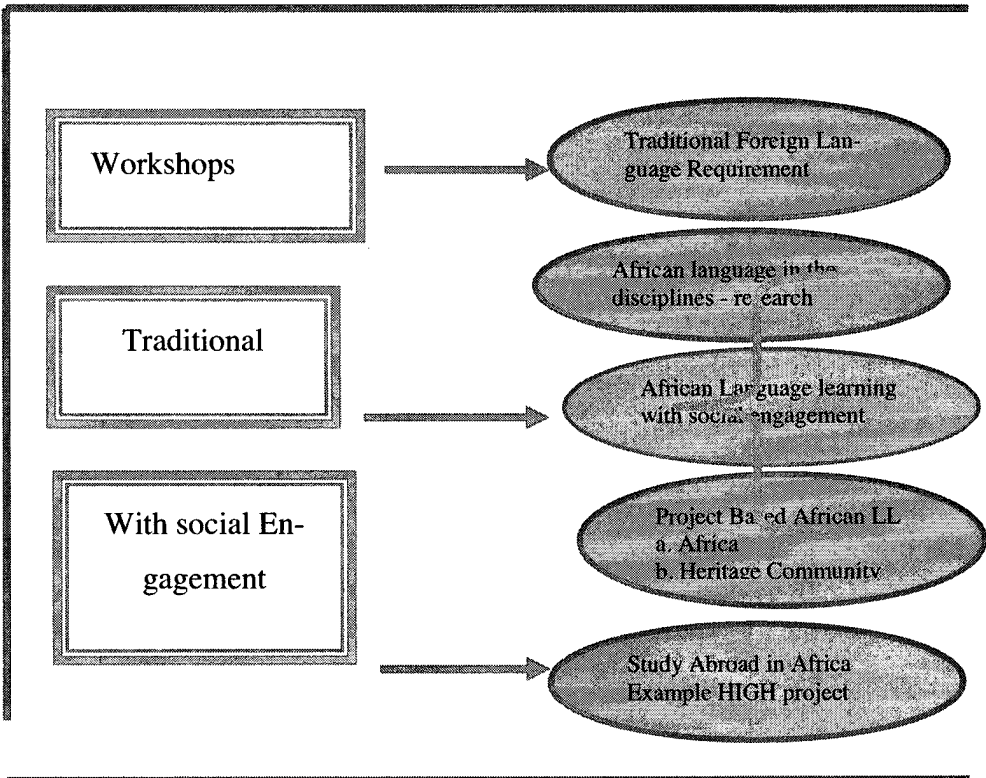
The teaching and learning of African languages in the HUALP

The HUALP program has its aim as meeting the needs of its clients. It is student centered. The program functions in three broad areas to meet the needs of its clients. These are traditional language teaching/learning, language learning with social engagement, and workshops. The traditional foreign language learning involves students who want to learn the language to fulfill a language requirement in their department, those who want to learn the language to integrate with their heritage community (heritage learners), and those who will learn the language for learning's sake, e.g. because their friend is a Ghanaian or their friend learns an African language. Another category is language learning with social engagement. This involves integrating language learning into the academic disciplines (CBI), learning the language to do research in Africa, and Project-based African language learning. The latter involves learning the language to be able to undertake a project in an African country or in a heritage

community in the US. The last category involves organizing workshops.

The workshops are organized sometimes as pre-departure orientation workshops for groups of students going on Study Abroad Programs in Africa e.g. HIGH (Harvard Institute of Global Health) or as election observers in an African country. These workshops involve a two week or more orientation in the language and culture of the country students will be visiting. Students are taught basic survival skills in the language.

Fig 2: African Languages Learning at Harvard University



The Content Course

The title of the course is *Delimiting Health Disparities in the African Diaspora: A Laboratory for Social Engagement*. It has a course number of AAAS 199 in the Departments of African and African-American Studies and Anthropology. The course introduces students to key theories from a range of disciplines, including medical anthropology, public health, social psychology, literature and the history of medicine, that highlight the social aspects of health and suffering. The readings explore how disease manifestations are part and parcel of cultural and historical processes. Differences in health outcomes, the perception of new disorders affecting migrating communities for the first time, and specific cultural framings of older familiar ailments all complicate the ways in which the putative universalism of biomedical knowledge might be rethought to better serve—and include—diverse communities of the black Diaspora.

Since this was a new course and on experimental basis, students had to apply. Priority was given to juniors and seniors, as well as to students planning thesis projects on health topics that affect contemporary Africa and its Diaspora. The small size was to allow students to begin to explore the above-stated issues through means of social engagement in communities with present and historical ties to Africa in the Boston area. The first half of the course was dedicated to reading key texts which facilitated the fieldwork and community-based learning activities. One practical goal of this course was to get students to do research on medical issues and their social roots and consequences. Because partnerships with and access to local African communities was a key component of students' ability to carry out the practicum element of this course, the Department of African and African-American Studies provided this course with the funding to hire 4 Harvard African language instructors with ties to local networks of people from Ghana, Senegal, Haiti, and Sudan who will join in week 6. In addition to connecting students with local communities, the language instructors will give students intro-

ductory language skills and serve as translators on projects when needed. Students can draw upon the language instructors for this course in order to interview people, attend church gatherings and services, and to partake in other informative community events that might provide insight into how individuals in these settings frame and address perceived health problems. Some examples of health disparities that affect local communities of the African Diaspora to be explored in the course include:

- The high diabetes incidence in Boston-area of Haitians, and its connection to the legacy of Haiti's sugar economy;
- The dramatic sedentary lifestyle change of Akan-Twi speakers in Worcester who feel that an epidemic of diabetes and hypertension is overtaking their group;
- The 'new disease' of 'stress' that affects Senegalese Wolof speakers who have long suffered from 'tooy,' (Trans. overwhelming fatigue);
- Complaints of pain from sickle cell trait (which is said to be benign in the US) by various West Africans;
- Depression from community dislocation and migration;
- Stigmas around HIV and poverty for Haitians and others;
- War trauma for South Sudanese refugees known as the 'Lost Boys and Girls' in Arlington and Somerville.

Course Based Research

1. Rethinking post-traumatic stress for refugees: Exploration of Mental Health and Coping in the Sudanese Diaspora - Arlington
2. Concepts of Health, Diet and Diabetes in the Haitian Immigrant Population Cambridge
3. Shifting Frameworks of Medical Pluralism: The Heightened Significance of Herbal Remedies in the Senegalese Diasporic Community - Cambridge
4. Linguistic expressions of well being: "Money as Blood" in the Akan Community Worcester

The Integration

The planning

The integration began with a series of meetings. The initial meeting was between the content teacher/professor and the director and language preceptor of the African Languages Program. The meeting discussed funding possibilities and the languages to be included in the integration. After funding had been secured from the Archeology Department, we proceeded to select the languages to be incorporated into the content teaching. The languages selected were Akan – Twi (spoken in Ghana), Dinka (spoken in Sudan), Wolof (spoken in Senegal) and Haitian Creole (spoken in Haiti). These languages were selected depending on the capabilities of the instructors and availability of the heritage community in the Greater Boston area. The second meeting included the selected instructor, the content professor (who has learned Dinka as a second language), the director and the preceptor of the African Languages Program. At the meeting, the content professor explicated on the objectives of the course and how the languages will be integrated into the content teaching. Each instructor was given the content course syllabus. The meeting also discussed issues of remuneration for instructors, work hours per week and the role of each instructor in ensuring the success of the course. Each instructor was to work with the students for five hours per week. The instructors were to base their teaching on the task of the students in their group. It was agreed that instructors will take students to the community at the beginning of the second half of the semester. This was to give students some exposure to the language and the content. The third meeting, which was between the language preceptor and the language instructors, involved pedagogic issues which involved syllabus design, material development, students' engagement and teaching strategies. This set the scene for the integration.

The implementation

On the first day of the content class, the language instructors met students involved in studying the course. There were twenty-two undergraduate students. The language instructors were introduced to the students who were later distributed among the instructors. Some of the students were put in a language group because of their interest and future plans to work in the community. The Haitian and Dinka groups had six students each while Akan and Wolof had five students each. Each instructor met students in their group and planned meeting times and time for going to the community for social interaction with the heritage community. Each student was given a language syllabus which included basic survival skills. They were informed that the syllabus is flexible and will continue to be modified depending on the direction of the course and the research topic they will select for their individual as well as the groups' final project work. Each instructor was given copies of articles in the content area which were conducted in their community. The roles assigned to the instructors were to act as liaisons, teach the language and culture to students, organize, design, and facilitate language learning. They were also to help students translate materials from the target language to English and explain the research to the community in the target language.

Assessment

- Continuous assessment which include class quizzes (mostly vocabulary), class exercises, homework
- Translation of simple materials
- The use of journals comprising writing summary after each lesson and writing freely on any topic, writing on how the language helped them in the content area and their research.
- Direct oral feedback during class, and use of target language in the community

- The performances of the students in the language did not form part of their grades in the content area. It was done to serve as motivation to the students and for them to see their progress.

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Implications to HUALP

This integration has the following implications for the African languages Program at Harvard University:

- Increase in enrollment and interest in African languages learning at HU
- Add value to African language teaching and learning at HU
- Expose the value of African languages to enhancing academic discipline
- Creation of more courses by professors with African languages in mind
- Shows the real value of African languages program in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS), and the entire college academic setting.
- Expose language instructors to the possibility of extending their language teaching/learning to the heritage community.
- Change the view and attitude towards African languages learning in the department and the university as a whole.

Conclusion:

The teaching of African languages in American universities will attract the respect it deserves when it is linked with academic disciplines to be of real-time value to students. The integration of language and content motivates and serves the interests of students. Content-Based Instruction has most often been the integration of language and content with second language learning purpose. The integration of language and content with content learning purpose has not been fully exploited by language teachers. For African language teachers, and more widely for Less

Commonly Taught Language teachers, this is a new arena we can exploit to make our language teaching and learning more meaningful and appealing to students and the larger university community. Language students want to experience the real-time value of the languages they learn and this is a sure way of achieving this. The success of such integration will depend on availability of funds, proper planning, quality language teachers, dedication and the hard work of languages teachers and students, and the willingness of professors in other academic disciplines to see the value of language in the courses they teach. The teaching of African languages and the other Less Commonly Taught Languages in American universities will be accorded the needed respect and boost in enrollment when it is linked to the teaching and development of academic disciplines.

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