

Title: Building Chinese Language Skills for Sino-African Cooperation through Open and Distance Learning

Theme: Skills Development

Sub-theme: Skills Development for National Development

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Abstract

China's influence and deep relationships in Africa are the result of many years of investment in building relations through aid, trade, and cultural and technical exchange. In international politics, this is regarded as "soft power". Yet, an important area that has for a long time not been given the penetrating attention it deserves, relates to the fundamental need to bridge the language barrier between Chinese and Africans, so as to ensure meaningful cooperation and engagement between China, the country, and Africa, the continent. In order to address this problem, the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) in collaboration with Huaren Chinese Services is currently promoting the use of open and distance learning (ODL) for the provision of Chinese language education and training at the Proficient, Certificate and Executive levels. The new programme has the central objective of breaking the communication barrier between Nigerian and Chinese business partners through a Chinese language training programme that would empower learners to speak Chinese language within the shortest possible time. The University uses a variety of delivery methods and tools including face to face (f2f), text-based resources, CD ROMs and Web-based resources, and has managed to build capacity in the field of ICT, by empowering staff with functional skills. Within this context, the relationship between the major theme and cross cutting aspects of the Sixth Pan-Commonwealth Forum (PCF6) are discussed under "Skills Development for National Development" with particular reference to language as a necessary tool for international cooperation. This study concludes with the relevance of the application of ODL methodologies in educational delivery and as a means of enhancing international cooperation.

Introduction

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is a viable means of supporting the attainment of academic, social and economic development. The clarion call for the institutionalisation of open and distance learning programmes in the developing countries has been on the high side, especially with the increasing recognition that new innovations and enhanced uses of information and communication technologies (ICT) can be harnessed in enhancing the delivery of education to millions of people who have been excluded from the benefits of education. In Africa, as elsewhere, even though distance education is not regarded as a *magic umu* that will cure all the educational ailments, it still presents a veritable tool for democratising and enhancing inclusive education.

The strongest argument for distance education is its potential to provide instruction to students who, because of distance, time, or financial constraints, do not have access to traditional learning opportunities or specialised courses. A study by Aderinoye and Ojokheta (2004) argues that distance education in Nigeria and throughout the continent of Africa is helping to democratise and spread knowledge even to those living in remote, marginalised, and isolated communities. The Aderinoye and Ojokheta study also acknowledged that distance education has helped individuals to acquire basic literacy and arithmetic skills, and in some instances, earn certificates in higher

degrees, as well as obtain a multitude of broad-brush education skills that target whole populations (eg., governance skills, life skills, computer skills, language skills etc).

Increasingly, the literature on open and distance learning has alluded to its strength in enhancing the instructional delivery of foreign languages. The potential for providing instruction in the less commonly taught languages is particularly enhanced by distance technology. In many cases, the guiding principle is for distance learning courses not to become permanent, but to serve as a stepping stone to hiring a regular classroom instructor by laying the basis for a viable language program, especially in the less commonly taught languages.

What is less discussed is how the delivery of language through the open and distance learning medium can serve as a tool for international cooperation. The aim of the present paper is to contribute to this discussion. The paper also aims to reflect the National Open University of Nigeria's Chinese language programme, its philosophy, mode of delivery, opportunities and constraints. Reference is made, in particular to the technology adopted for its delivery and the learner support infrastructure in place. The paper aims through focus groups discussions (FGDs), a review of programme documents and select interviews with faculty and learners, how the programme is enhancing Chinese language skills acquisition. The paper is addressed, as an open invitation, to a wide range of potential partners, interested in this field, to examine how open and distance learning can effectively enhance international cooperation.

Conceptual Issues

Distance education has been defined as an educational process in which teachers and learners are separated in space/ and or time for some or all the study and in which learning materials take over some of the traditional role of the teacher. Moore and Kearsley (1996) define distance education as planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching and as a result requires special techniques of course design, special instructional techniques, methods of communication by electronic and other technology, as well as special organisational administrative arrangements. Distance education is the delivery of learning or training to learners who are separated, mostly by time and space, from those who are teaching and training.

On the other hand, open learning describes policies and practices that permit entry to learning with no barriers or minimal barriers of age, gender or time while recognising prior learning. Conceptually distinct, yet complementary, these two phenomena come together in the term open and distance learning. ODL provides flexible learning opportunities and has been key to enabling more people to overcome barriers to access education for reasons of age, gender or physical remoteness. Open approaches can also help to scale initiatives so that curricula, teaching materials and other learning content can be freely accessed and adapted to other contexts.

The Context

There is no denying the fact that the influence of China on the continent of Africa has continued to deepen. Evolving from ideologically-driven interactions during the Cold War, today's China-African relations combine pragmatic economic and political means in enhancing a peaceful and conducive society. China greatly values its relation with African countries, and seems to consolidate this relationship through its emphasis on its soft power, defined as a country's 'culture, political values, foreign policies, and economic attention as essential strength, providing the capacity to persuade other nations to willingly adopt the same goals.

Chinese language learning has become increasingly popular on the African continent in recent years. According to the Office of the Chinese Language Council International, China has sent delegations of language teachers to Africa as many as 210 times. There are currently six Confucius Institutes and 20 Chinese teaching posts in 11 African countries (People's Daily, 2006). The Chinese government believes that a greater understanding of the country's culture, political values, language, and economy would enhance its closer engagement with Africa. No wonder, African countries have since the launching of China-Africa Cooperation Forum (FOCAC)

in 2000, the first multilateral, consultative mechanism between China and Africa as a vehicle for bolstering commercial and political relations (Holstag, 2006), reacted pragmatically in putting in place programmes to enhance this cooperation, including the learning of Chinese language.

Nigeria, the most populous country in sub-Saharan Africa has witnessed within a few years intensive and progressive cooperation with China. Even though, China's engagement with the country goes back to the post-independence era, economic exchanges between the two countries were largely marginal. Even when China was playing a dominant role in non-aligned movement, and was desirous of wooing African countries in forums such as the Beijing Conference, the conservative Nigerian government in Lagos at independence was an unlikely ally of a communist government and did not rush to embrace its China counterpart. As argued by Utomi (2008), Chinese premier Zhou En-lai's 10-country trip in the late 1963 did not include Nigeria. However, from 1990, the level of trade rapidly increased from 1.3 billion Nigerian naira to 5.3 billion in 1996, to 8.6 billion in 2000. The increase in the volume of trade was accompanied by a rise in high-level visitation. Nigeria, as of 2007 was regarded as the highest producer of oil in Africa, and was listed by the Energy Information Administration as the world's twelfth largest oil producer in the world. Even though the country has historically exported oil to the Western world, China, is becoming increasingly an important player to Nigeria, and Nigeria has been designated a 'strategic partner' in the Chinese diplomatic lexicon (Alden, 2008:110). The level of trade in non-oil products between the two countries has also greatly increased. These peculiar features of the Nigerian society make Nigeria an interesting case concerning China's engagement in Africa.

It is perhaps based on this recognition that the two countries have stressed the need to know each other better, not only in business interaction, but through culture as well as human capacity development, that the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), in collaboration with Huaren Chinese Services, is currently promoting the use of open and distance learning (ODL) for the provision of Chinese language education and training at the Proficient, Certificate and Executive levels. The new programme has the central objective of breaking the communication barrier between Nigerian and Chinese business partners through a Chinese language training programme that would empower learners to speak Chinese language within the shortest possible time. This programme is tailored towards ensuring that these countries deepen their ties.

Chinese Language Programme at the National Open University of Nigeria

The Chinese language programme at the National Open University of Nigeria was established in 2009, with the following objectives (a) breaking the communication barrier between Nigerian and Chinese business partners through a Chinese language training programme that would empower learners to speak Chinese language within the shortest possible time (b) improving the communication between Nigerian and Chinese business transactions (c) developing and delivering Chinese language e-learning portals via ODL media to potential learners (d) enhancing cooperation between Nigerians and Chinese. These objectives are in conformity with the mission of the University, *to provide functional, cost-effective, flexible learning which adds life-long value to quality education for all who seek knowledge.*

The delivery mode of the programme is still at an infancy stage of the e-learning environment, intended to provide innovative ICT-based content, pedagogy, and service as a lifelong learning opportunity. As the ELBEP (2010) reports acknowledges, this approach ensures that the "target population has access to an open and flexible learning environment, which overcomes many limitations faced in conventional educational settings, such as logistic restrictions of gathering all learners at one place at the same time". In a broad sense, the expected impact of teaching beginner's level second language to the learners is solving the communication problem, promoting intercultural understanding, to pave way for cooperation between these countries.

Chinese Language Programme Structure

The Chinese language programme is organised at three levels, Proficient, Certificate and Executive levels. The executive programme has been designed specifically for corporate

organisations and is structured to run for 1 month. The certificate and proficient programmes are designed to run for a period of 6-9 months, and 3 months respectively. Information packages aimed at awareness raising and preparation of target groups, such as leaflets, brochures, and flyers, web content, and radio and television jingles have been produced by the University to attract potential learners.

Despite the high expectations that the pilot phase of the programme would attract a high number of learners, this has not been the case, reminiscence of the fact that most Nigerians still regard open and distance education as been second class to conventional education.

Impact and Processes of the Chinese Language Programme

The measurement of impact and processes is based on analysis of qualitative and quantitative methods. Since the number of learners is still small, it was possible to interview all the learners, the facilitators, knowledge management technologists, study centre managers and other support staff. For comparative purposes only, we also included French language learners. Qualitative methods are effective in delving into reasons for participation in the course and the choice of the type of programme. The inclusion of the qualitative data measurement approach is to illuminate other closely related problems that would otherwise not emerge with quantitative measurement tools. The second method utilised in this study is the quantitative measurement. The essence is to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of the programme. On the quantitative part, semi-structured in-depth telephone interviews were utilised to obtain a grounded understanding of learner feedback to courses.

Success of the Chinese Language Programme

In order to ascertain the degree of the success of the programme, learners, facilitators/administrators, study centre managers and knowledge management technologists were asked to indicate their level of approval for a variety of indices which could be considered as determining the level of success of a delivery and learning of a foreign language. The indicator used for this analysis was developed from the literature on the learning of foreign language at a distance, including (Altunay, 2008; ELBEP, 2010). Participants were asked to indicate their level of success/non success for eight activities that range from issues of technology used to the fee structure. The responses for all eight activities were then summed to form the additive scale of success for the programme.

Table 1: Success of the delivery of the Chinese Language Programme

Question: Please indicate your level of approval for each item as a means of determining the success of the programme (1= highly successful to 5= highly unsuccessful)				
Item:	Facilitators (mean)	Learners (mean)	KMT/Administrators (mean)	F-test
Opportunity for cohort-based learning, and immediate, personalised feedback	1.25	1.26	1.65	40.92
Timely delivery of course materials	1.47	1.66	1.57	4.20
The fee structure and cost effectiveness	2.50	2.47	2.12	11.75
Academic facilitation	2.30	2.20	2.23	0.54
e-support and ICT	2.32	2.09	2.04	6.14
Learner support services	2.46	2.49	2.64	2.19
The use of a range of media	3.88	3.57	3.65	4.36
Cultural sensitivity	4.73	4.71	4.47	10.89
Additive Scale mean:	21.20	20.42	19.99	

	s.d=5.76	s.d.=5.71	s.d.=4.47	
	n=234	n=299	n=379	
Cronbach's alpha	.88	.88	.89	

* $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$ *** $\leq .001$

Table 1 sets forth findings regarding the level of success expressed for each of the several indicators of a foreign language programme delivered via the distance education method. Taken in combination, responses to these items form the level of success of the programme. A comparison across the different interviewees reveals statistically significant differences between the three groups (facilitators', learners, and KMTs) with respect to six of the eight indicators. Facilitators appear to be more slightly more supportive of "opportunity for cohort-based learning, and immediate, personalised feedback" and "timely delivery of course materials" when compared to learners and KMTs. For the remaining forms of success were statistically significant differences are evident (fee structure and cost effectiveness, academic facilitation..., the use of a range of media and cultural sensitivity), facilitators regard these as less than successful. Learners and KMTs are slightly more confidence of the success of these forms of items. It should be noted, however, that there is little support among the three groups of interviewees for "the use of a range of media" or for "cultural sensitivity." In fact, the mean scores for "cultural sensitivity" suggest that the overwhelming majority of the respondents strongly consider it as unsuccessful.

Reasons for Enrolment in the Chinese Language Programme

The next question that we sought to answer was the reason for the enrolment in the Chinese language programme. There are quite of number of reasons why learners have chosen to study Chinese language at the National Open University of Nigeria. Table 2 represents a statistical data from respondents.

Table 2 Reasons for Enrolment for the Chinese Language Programme

Question: There are many reasons why people choose to study a foreign language at a distance. The following reasons have been proposed. Which do you find most desirable?			
Reasons:	Proficiency Learners (%)	Certificate Learners (%)	Executive Learners (%)
For professional development	25.5	52.4	60.1
Fee structure	8.5	6.7	2.0
Work and family commitment	6.0	8.8	11.6
The desire to learn a foreign language	9.6	11.1	3.0
To facilitate business contact with Chinese	14.8	9.7	17.3
To study in China	35.5	11.3	6.0

The indicator used to ascertain the reason for enrolment in different levels of the Chinese language programme required the respondents to select the most desirable reason for enrolling in the programme from a list of six possibilities. The response category range from "professional development" to desire "to study in China." The precise question wording and the response categories utilised are set forth in Table 2. As suggested, those enrolled for Executive and Certificate programmes do so because of professional development (60.1 percent of Executive and 52.4 percent of Certificate learners). Only proficiency learners expressed that they were desirous of studying in China. Similarly, both proficiency learners and executive learners equally expressed that the programme would facilitate business contact with Chinese (14.8 percent and 17.3 percent respectively) motivated them to study at NOUN. However, all respondents were almost in agreement that the fee structure did not motivate them in enrolling at NOUN.

Enhancing cooperation between Nigeria and China

Since we are living in the “information age” and the importance of the need for communication among people from different cultures is increasing day by day in the globalizing world, people need to learn the languages of different cultures. The last decade has witnessed the growth in distance language learning opportunities. Rapid development in information and communications technology together with societal changes, have increased the demand for distance education- and now online learning and distributed learning (Whyte, 2003:1). In the context of this study, the increasing globalisation of the economy and global politics as well as culture has necessitated the need to learn foreign languages. The increasing engagement of China with Nigeria represents this growing trend.

When asked how the programme would enhance Sino-African cooperation, the three Focus Groups were in agreement that the learning of the Chinese language by Nigerians was a great leap in enhancing the cooperation of the peoples and government of the two countries. Our first respondent acknowledged that:

“with the increasing ability of Nigerians to speak our language, the fear that we are here to colonise African markets is been reversed. We are working as business partners with Nigerians. We have so many things in common: population (we are the giant in the world.., I also believe that Nigeria is the giant in Africa), industry and leadership. It is a remarkable feat that Open University of Nigeria (sic) and Huaren Chinese Services are working towards making Nigerians to speak Chinese.

A male respondent was of the view that most of them were studying the language to enable them study in China. In his view:

...most of us, desirous of studying in China for sometime now have not been successful. The simple reason was that we could not communicate with them. For me, this programme would not only enhance my Chinese reading and writing skills, it would open a window for me to study in China.

For most of the learners, their enrolment in the programme was for professional development. A female respondent noted that most of them were working with Non Government Organisations (NGOs) and were therefore taken the programme for their professional growth and development to enhance their knowledge and to improve their language skills and capacity building:

..nowadays, most NGOs, both in China and other developing partners demand our knowledge of Chinese language. Both western donors (now interested in China) and Chinese donors demand a little understanding of China. I believe that this programme would enhance my participation in this competitive environment.

Yet, most of the participants argued that open and distance learning offered the best opportunity for them to study Chinese language. Our respondent seems to capture this fact when he remarked,

“...the method of delivery greatly improves our ability to conduct businesses with the Chinese. Among a team of traders that we work in a Chinese shop (3 females, and 6 males), the two of us, enrolled for the programme are given preferential treatment by our masters (sic) as we can communicate better with them and their friends, that often come to the shop. What is more, we are in a position to practice albeit in stages, what we have learned. My usage of computer and ability to check emails clearly demonstrate to me what it means to learn Chinese language at the National Open University (sic).

The FGDs clearly show that open and distance education is a veritable tool for knowledge acquisition in enhancing cooperation between Nigeria and China. While technological issues are key in distance education delivery, technology *per se* is not as important as other factors such as

learners' motivation, an understanding of the distance learning context, accessibility of learning, the responsiveness of the facilitators and the overall context of the delivery seem to be very important. However, along the many advantages of distance learning, including flexibility and costs, distance education also have challenges such as a lack of communication, a sense of disconnectedness, and lack of confidence commonly felt by learners. In the case of this programme, the challenge is even enormous, as students find little opportunity to communicate in the language itself with this particular learning environment, leading to frustration (Ambe-Uva, 2007). The Chinese language at NOUN seems to be experiencing these challenges, however, with the employment of audio and video conferencing, with other multi-media packages, such as audio and video tapes, CD Roms, printed course materials, and individualised counseling, together with f2f tutorials, this is becoming less of a problem.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to understand how the building of Chinese language skills through open and distance learning would contribute to Sino- African cooperation. While there are several conception of distance education: structural concerns, pedagogical concerns, and learner based perspective, we were more interested in the structural concerns following Keegan (1990) conception, where issues of separation of teacher and learner; influence of educational organisation; the use of a range of media; the use of communication devices; the possibility of f2f contact and; the provision of a range of support service are brought into sharp focus.

The Chinese language programme can be adjudged to be success story, evidence from the data presented above. Similarly, majority of the respondents are in agreement that their enrolment in the programme would substantially enhance their business contact with the Chinese. This programme, therefore, demands the study's reflection for a number of reasons. (1) Those enrolled in the programme are increasingly able to communicate more effective with Chinese, hence this will enhance their participation in the global economy, where China is playing a prominent role (2) Participants are gaining more knowledge about Chinese values, politics, culture, economy, business ethics and language, and as such would be more objective in responding to issues about China (3) Since China provides *another alternative* or *third option* for Nigeria, learning more about the Chinese would enhance both educational, diplomatic, development aid, and greater cooperation and participation at the international forum.

The delivery of the Chinese language programme through the open and distance learning platform should therefore be encouraged by both partners. However, greater efforts should be made in delivering the programme to Nigerians beyond the commercial capital of Nigeria, Lagos. National Open University of Nigeria has 38 Study Centres located across the length and breath of the country. Therefore, the delivery should be spread to all the Study Centres and Special Centres. This demands a step-up in the efforts to recruit students. Here, the role of the new media should be promoted. Similarly, radio jingles should be promoted at the state and local government levels to ensure that more people are informed about the programme. Needless to recommend that the Chinese government and other relevant stakeholders need a higher level of partnership. Open and distance learning (ODL) programmes have the great advantage of reaching many more people than conventional face-to-face programmes and training while also being highly contextualised. Focusing squarely on issues affecting the daily lives of individuals and the communities in which they live, an ODL approach can address specific problems and challenges through learning objectives directed toward pragmatic outcomes.

Since ODL relies on technology as the vehicle for learning content, one of the main challenges in reaching people in rural, remote and resource-poor communities – where needs are often greatest and ODL is, arguably, most relevant – is the lack of infrastructure. Beyond computers and Internet connectivity, educational access barriers start at a more fundamental level with electricity and roads. Since so many education and training programmes, even in non-formal settings, depend on written text, literacy is likewise a major obstacle. The use of appropriate technologies, ones that overcome these barriers and build on cultural elements, is essential for

the Chinese language programme. Another critical success factor, mentioned in the literature is incorporating culture when designing and implementing a learning programme.

It is hoped that this paper gives an idea about how open and distance education, is been used in developing language skills, which are critical to cooperation between countries. The Chinese language programme therefore needs to be rigorously marketed and sustained.

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