

Abinibi Project: Intergenerational learning programme

Gbemisola Isimi explains the Abinibi project and the importance of Language Custodians in raising bilingual children

A popular Yoruba proverb goes thus: “*Odò ti ó bá gbàgbé orisun gbi gbẹ́ ló ngbẹ́*”. The English translation of this is “A river that forgets its source will eventually dry up”.

Like every proverb, this could be interpreted in multiple ways to suit any situation. At CultureTree it is our clarion call. Our mission is clear, to preserve and promote African languages and culture in the hearts and minds of adults and children across the world, encouraging them to develop authentic cultural expressions within their country of residence.

We have started this mission with teaching Yoruba language and our focus presently is on children. Languages die out every day when the last speakers die. Many fear this is a fate that might befall Yoruba descendants in the diaspora. In a typical Nigerian household, the grandparents may understand and speak their language, but they don't speak it to their children or grandchildren. We believe that if we do not pass on our culture and our language to our children, they will forget it and it will eventually become extinct - the proverbial river will run dry.

Language Custodians

Yoruba is a language spoken in West Africa and most prominently in South western Nigeria. It is spoken by over 50 million people across the world, in the UK, the United States, South



Language Custodian: Grandma Mrs Akinlade with her grandchildren

America and many other countries.

The challenge we face is that with migration came negligence from the original speakers of Yoruba language in the diaspora to pass the language on to their children. These second generation children have now grown into adults and parents who do not speak the language or, at least, do not speak it well enough to teach their children. They would like to, and this is where our Yoruba language courses at CultureTree Academy come in.

Most African parents in the diaspora are raising their children in a community where English is

the majority language and language teachers can only do so much with lessons, recorded videos, homework etc. The bulk of the work actually falls on parents to create an immersion environment. But how can they do that when they don't live in such an environment and they're not fluent speakers? How can parents raise bilingual children in a semi-bilingual or monolingual household?

Well, this is why we strongly advocate for older speakers of the language to take part in the education of bilingual children. We call these older speakers the family language custodians: people who actively work

to protect, preserve and rejuvenate a language.

Every bilingual family ought to have a language custodian. These family language custodians could be grandparents, an older family member or a friend who is fluent in the language. They can step in and support parents with teaching the language and culture. Children need to have a lot of exposure to the sounds, words, and grammars of the languages that they are learning. The family's chosen language custodian can help with this.

Alongside our language classes, we strongly encourage every family to have a family language custodian but the feedback from parents of the students in our language classes was always that grandparents weren't of much help and always fell back to speaking English to their children out of habit. This is what led to the creation of the Abinibi project.

About Abinibi Project

We decided to run an intergenerational pilot project in which five older adult volunteers aged 50 years of age and older with a high level of Yoruba language proficiency skills would be paired with five young children aged 7–13 years old with beginner to mid-level Yoruba language skills for an intensive 4 weeks period of Yoruba language instruction, language practice, and intergenerational relationship building activities.

Our aim with the project is to see how effective having an elder 'language custodian' for even a short period of time improves our young participants' Yoruba speaking skills and their motivation to practise and extend their learning.

Scheduled to commence in May 2021 and led by Gbemisola Isimi, Dame Karin Barber and Kúnmi Ọlátúnjí, the project would begin with a collaborative planning session, where course content and

expectations will be discussed and agreed. The intergenerational context will be reflected in the curricular activities designed to stimulate intergenerational (teacher-learner) sharing of real-life interests, stories, experiences, and perspectives. The one-to-one sessions will provide input and ongoing interaction in the language which is necessary in fostering functional bilingualism.

Community-led approach

Our learning community is made up of a cross section of the African Diaspora and this community is always looking for ways in which to engage culturally and preserve the Yoruba language. The Abinibi project was initially meant to be face-to-face but due to Covid-19 pandemic the community has not been able to meet and opportunities to learn have had to be adapted to be safe under current circumstances and will take place online via Zoom.

The project tackles loneliness for adults who might perhaps have limited opportunities to interact with family and friends, due to shielding advice, and fears about Covid-19. It will upskill our adult participants in their digital skills as well as build on their Yoruba to make them effective teachers, which will serve the younger generation and give all parties much needed interaction with people outside of their homes.

The children will benefit from learning and developing their Yoruba proficiency and interacting with an adult not in their household. The project will also improve the mental health and wellbeing of all participants, by providing a fun outlet and improved confidence from trying something new and acquiring new skills. It will strengthen our community which has inevitably been affected negatively by the pandemic, and also crucially maintain the intergenerational link that is so important in our language preservation work.

The objectives of the Project

■ For the younger students, a group with Yoruba language skills ranging from beginner to intermediate level, the primary objective will be to strengthen and expand their Yoruba speaking skills, helping them develop, practise, and improve their Yoruba language skills;

■ For all participants to gain confidence from learning a new skill;

■ to create a Yoruba-oriented intergenerational learning environment that stimulates student interest and practice with regard to using Yoruba language in real world contexts;

■ For the older adult volunteers, all of whom will have a high self-perceived level of Yoruba language proficiency, the primary objective will be to help them develop professional skills in teaching Yoruba as a second language. A secondary objective is to provide them with opportunities to meet and share life experiences with the students, thereby expanding their interests and abilities for engaging youth in the community.

Project Planning and Implementation

The general emphasis will be on providing the students with a structured program with the general goal of helping them develop, practise, and improve their Yoruba language skills for their personal purposes and daily life pursuits.

All of the teaching and learning materials will be co-developed by the adult participants and the children with guidance from the programme facilitators.

The curriculum will be designed to:

■ provide students with opportunities to (further) develop and practice all four language skills (i.e., listening, writing, reading and speaking);

■ focus on themes or topics that have the potential to stimulate discovery about common needs and interests across generations;

■ provide intergenerational

“This community is always looking for ways in which to engage culturally and preserve the Yoruba language.”

engagement opportunities utilising multiple media;

■ actively engage all participants in curriculum development; students and older adult participants provide input and work collaboratively to help determine the foci of readings, discussions, and activities.

The one-to-one sessions will last for 30 – 45 minutes once a week for the 4 weeks.

Choosing our elder participants

To recruit the elder participants/ language custodians, we advertised the project on our social media platforms and asked our community to spread the word far and wide. We had a total of 12 applicants who completed our application form. In the form we asked some key questions about their background, level of Yoruba proficiency and crucially, why they were interested in the project. Here are some of the reasons our elder applicants gave for wanting to participate in the project:

“I would like to partake in transferring our culture to the future generation.”

“I am passionate about Yorùbá Language have been teaching my children and friends’ children and I am quite concerned that if we as Yorùbá people don’t continue in this process diligently, our beloved language faces extinction. We must not and cannot have that.”

“I have always been a proud Yoruba language speaker, and if the truth be told, I am disappointed that this language is in decline. The younger Yoruba generation cannot even understand it, let alone speak or write it. I would like to see if I can bring a change to this issue.”

“I have a fear of Yoruba Language dying”

“I would like to pass on my knowledge and do what I can, so the Yoruba language does not become extinct.”

“Nitori o se pataki lati gbe eede abinibi ni aruge fun iyi ati ogo ojo iwaju wa.” –

Because it is important to uphold and celebrate our mother tongue for the honour and glory of our future.

We interviewed all applicants and successfully selected five of them based on their enthusiasm and passion shown for the project and the preservation of Yoruba language.

Choosing our younger participants

We invited all the children in our Yoruba language classes to participate in the project and successfully selected 5 of them. Below are some of the reasons their parents gave for wanting them to participate in the project:

“We are a mixed heritage family of five, passionate about our children growing up with a strong sense of heritage and belonging. Our eldest two have been supporting their Yoruba learning journey through Saturday classes and videos. The Abinibi project will be a very practical way for our children to put their learning efforts into practical discussions with elder members of the Yoruba community first-hand (the way I learned). We are excited to take part in the pilot.”

“To help bridge the generational gap, support my child’s learning through building a relationship with an older buddy who is not immediate family. Also help the older participants connect with this young generation in a learning environment.”

“I’ve tried to get my parents to teach my children Yoruba since they were born but for some reason, they always speak to them in English just like they did with us growing up. I’d love to have an elder speak to my children in Yoruba and hopefully that would encourage my parents to do the same.”

Anticipated Challenges

The project has been carefully planned but we are aware that it can be difficult to maintain a learning relationship through an online platform. We are therefore expecting some teething problems which could be lack of engagement from the children, inability of the adult participants to keep their interest



Elders as catalysts for change: Grandpa Mr Akinlade with his grandchildren

or even a mismatch of personalities. We hope to reduce these challenges by running a training session for the Adult participants and an induction with the children and their parents. It is a pilot, so we hope to glean a lot of insight for the project going forward.

Outcome of the Abinibi Project

Long term we hope that more Elder participants will see themselves as important catalysts for language maintenance and would want to participate in future projects. Likewise, we would be honoured to have the children on our language courses be junior leaders and facilitate in future sessions.

We hope to see stronger bonds in our community and believe the intergenerational connection will strengthen the efforts of language preservation. Once the pilot is complete, we envision this project being repeated for many more cohorts with the necessary funding/grants and creating a cycle of empowered adults and children around their love of Yoruba language. ■

Gbemisola Isimi is the Founder and Managing Director of Culture Tree.