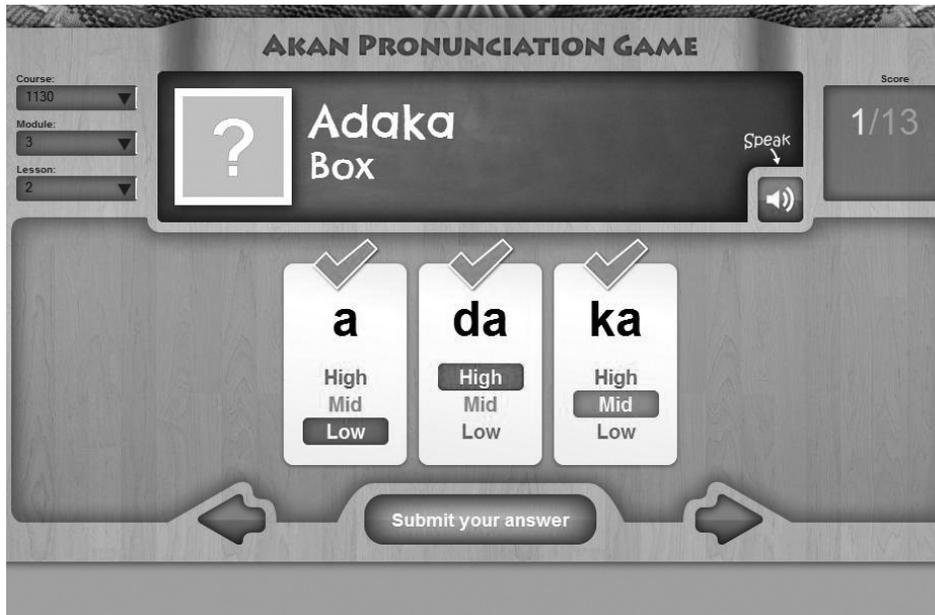


# Developing an Online African Language Course

JAMES ESSEGBEY



Is it possible to develop an online course for African language learners? With financial support from the Center for International Business and Research (CIBER) and the Center for African Studies (CAS) I spent the past year developing an online Beginning Akan course which aims to develop cultural competence by immersing students in the various facets of rural and urban Akan life through multimedia and interactive online activities. For such an enterprise we faced the challenge of getting authentic video material. I therefore traveled through some major Akan areas such as Kumasi, the capital city of the Ashanti Region and seat of the Asante King, and towns like Nkawkaw, Kokofu, Bosomtwe, and Cape Coast. I went to these places with Obenewa Nkansah and Marian Abbey, both graduates of the School of Performing Arts at the University of Ghana, Kofi Amo Ofori, our current Akan teaching assistant who is from Kumasi, and Chris Tagbor, a videographer. Obenewa played the role of Kelli, an American student studying Akan at the University of Florida who was visiting her friend Yaa, a student at the University of Ghana. Kofi Amo played the role of their Akan professor. This gave us the opportunity to cover a lot of topics from such simple issues as greetings and giving directions to more complex ones like the prepara-

tion of different kinds of foods and the discussion of conservation at the Kakum National Park in the Central Region. In all these scenarios, our three performers had instructions to speak carefully such that the material would be useable for language learners. However, in order to make it authentic, they were not given any scripts to learn and recite. Moreover, the people with whom they interacted at the various places were allowed to speak naturally. Our scenarios included Obenewa and Marian getting a tourist guide at Bosomtwe to tell them the story of Lake Bosomtwe and why it is considered sacred among the Asante people, as well as having a health superintendant and a senior nurse treat Obenewa who fell ill with malaria fever.

The videos were edited into short clips after which lessons were prepared to cover them. The lessons for Beginning Akan I were narrated by advanced Akan student Maia Bass and TA Kofi Amo, while those of Beginning Akan II are narrated

by undergraduate student Marilyn Okine and Amo. Considering that Akan is a tonal language and students are expected to learn the pronunciation of the words by themselves, I worked with Bash Choudhry at the UF Center of Instructional Technology and Training (CITT) to develop a tone game. Syllables in Akan have a high, low or a down-stepped tone. We represented the high tone with red, the low tone with green and the downstepped tone with orange. We recorded the careful pronunciation of the words in the various lessons by Kofi, which were then played on the piano and drums by Elikem Nyamuame (UF ethnomusicology doctoral student). After listening to the pronunciation of the word and its rendition on the piano and drums, a student is required to color the tones. The game can be found at: <http://game.africa.ufl.edu/app/index.php>

Currently the course is being taught as a hybrid course. The eventual aim is to make it a fully online course with minimal input from the instructor. The lessons have been compiled into an electronic textbook which is given to students free of charge. Also, with the help of Fred Meyler, another undergraduate student, we have put together an electronic dictionary which is based on Christaller's dictionary of the Twi language.

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