

PRECARITY AMONG CHINESE LANGUAGE LEARNERS AT THE CONFUCIUS INSTITUTE AT NNAMDI AZIKIWE UNIVERSITY: STUDY OF SINGLE-PROGRAMME STUDENTS

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Abstract

This article microscopes one of the two categories of the Chinese language learners at the Confucius Institute at Nnamdi Azikiwe University (CI-NAU). These students, known as HSK students, have not gone to university or any other institution of higher learning. Their counterparts, known as combined-programme students, combine their Chinese language study at the Institute with degree programme. The specific phenomenon investigated is precarity among the students in the first category who have left the Institute and are already working. The data were mostly generated from the questionnaire administered on thirty members of the category in a social media group called the Association of Foreign Language Translators of Nigeria (AFLAN). It discovered that the precarity rate is high, notwithstanding its denial by the respondents.

Keywords: Chinese language learners, non-graduate learners, HSK students, combined programme students, CI-NAU

Introduction

The Confucius Institute at Nnamdi Azikiwe University (hereinafter called CI-NAU) is the first Confucius Institute (hereinafter called CI) established in Nigeria (Embassy, 2008). (The other CI in the country is at the University of Lagos). About 1800 students study at the CI every year (Yu et al.). One of the two Chinese proficiency test centres in the country where HSK, Youth Chinese Test (YCT), Business Chinese Test (BCT) and Medical Chinese Test (MCT) are held, CI-NAU runs a six-level Chinese proficiency programme called HSK (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi) that caters to the avidity for the Chinese language in the country. The programme enrolls graduates and non-graduate learners alike, who are motivated by the prospects of translating career opportunities and personal development. The intake is divided into single-programme students and combined-programme students. The former (informally labelled HSK students) consists of those who do not have any higher education yet. Most are secondary-school leavers, but there is also a sprinkling of primary-school leavers. The latter consists of the students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University who are combining their degree studies with their HSK studies. The two-year HSK programme has two examinations, namely HSK (which is made up of four parts--- listening (听力),

speaking (口语) reading (读字) and writing (写字) and HSKK (HSK Kouyu, the oral examination).

HSK (Chinese Proficiency Test) is organised by Chinese Tests International. The world third largest language test brand after IELTS and TOEFL, it “assesses Chinese learners' abilities to use Chinese as a second language in their daily, academic, and professional lives through a standardized examination and evaluation with a uniform grading and scoring system (**Chinese Tests, n.d.**). It is China's only official test of Chinese language proficiency for non-native speakers---foreign students, Overseas Chinese and ethnic groups in China (**University, n.d.**) as well as the leading brand of the series of global Chinese test brands and service systems (**CLEC, n.d.**). Learners use it to track their language proficiency; employers use it to assess prospective employees; Chinese language centres use it to evaluate teaching effectiveness; universities use it for admissions, class placement and credit transfer standards. Its three groupings are: HSK 1, SHSK 2, HSK 3 (entrance/basic levels), HSK 4 (intermediate level) and HSK 5 and HSK 6 (advanced levels). CI-NAU, which has been recognised as an “Outstanding HSK Test Center” four times (**Yu et al.**), is one of the three accredited HSK centres in the country. (The other two centres are at CI at the University of Lagos and the China Cultural Center in Abuja). The Institute’s remarkable achievements in this examination have not only earned it global renown but also contributed to the rise in the global visibility of the host university.

CI-NAU recommends both categories of students for scholarships to study in China; but while the combined-programme students may proceed to pursue master's studies, those from the latter can only pursue either one-year language studies or bachelor's degrees. Many of those who pursue one-year studies remain in China after obtaining scholarships for bachelor's degree studies.

It has been observed that an increasing number of those in the latter category now prefer to work (去工作) rather than seek bachelor's degree studies in China. This growing trend towards short-termism, which is found in other developing countries like Ghana, Kenya, Pakistan, Vietnam and Brazil, does not only limit career advancement and stunt self-fulfillment but also brings into question the functionality and desirability of the HSK programme. The authors of this paper were astounded to see that the vast majority of the students in this category, who earn good salaries, are hardly worried about a future without a higher education. It was that premonitory apprehension that actuated their decision to engage the trend. The alumni generally earn somewhere in the region of N350, 000 as starting salary and may highball their demand to as much as N500, 000. Perks include free meals and accommodation. While their employees grapple with stickability (the alumni tend to hop from job to job), the alumni grapple with the tendency of their employers to hire and fire at whim. It has been observed that an increasing number of those in the latter category now prefer to work rather than seek for bachelor's degree studies in China. This growing

trend towards short-termism brings into question the functionality and desirability of the HSK programme.

This ominous trend, which is certain to constrict both career advancement and self-realisation, is found in other developing countries like Ghana, Kenya, Pakistan, Vietnam and Brazil.

This paper engages this alarming trend towards short-termism among the Chinese language learners we have at CI-NAU, focusing on precarity among those without a higher education.

Data Collection and Presentation

The data for this study were collected from literature and interview. The former is still abysmally scanty, with the result that the bulk of the data had to come from the latter. For the latter, a questionnaire was administered online to members of a WhatsApp group called AFLAN (Association of Foreign Language Translators of Nigeria). This was done because it was so difficult to reach the intended respondents one-on-one or as a specific group. They did not have any in-group; but most of them belonged to this particular group. That was why it was decided to try reaching them through this group.

There were 997 members of the group at the time the questionnaire was administered but only 30 responses were received. This was done because the intended respondents could not be reached one-on-one or as an in-group. They did not have any in-group; but because most

of them belonged to AFLAN, it was decided to use the group. The authors did not have the faintest idea on how many of the intended respondents were in that job-search group, but they strongly believed most of them were in the group. The paucity of response was due to time poorness and/or unwillingness to discuss matters deemed private.

Pie chart and pictogram were combinedly and used in presenting the data, because surfeit of responses to most of the questions could not be presented with pie chart but with pictogram.

The variables were divided into primary variables and secondary variables. The former included gender, age, marital status, highest educational level prior to enrolment at CI-NAU, motivation for studying the Chinese language, HSK level and study duration. The secondary variables included job, job location, remuneration, discrimination, etc.

Diagram 1: Gender female (68.8%); male (31.3%)

Diagram 2: Age 18-24 years (55.2%); 25-34 years (22.9%); 35-44 years (21.9%)

Diagram 3: Marital Status single (96.7%); married (3.3%)

Diagram 4: Highest level of education prior to enrolment at the Confucius Institute: secondary school (72%); primary school (28%)

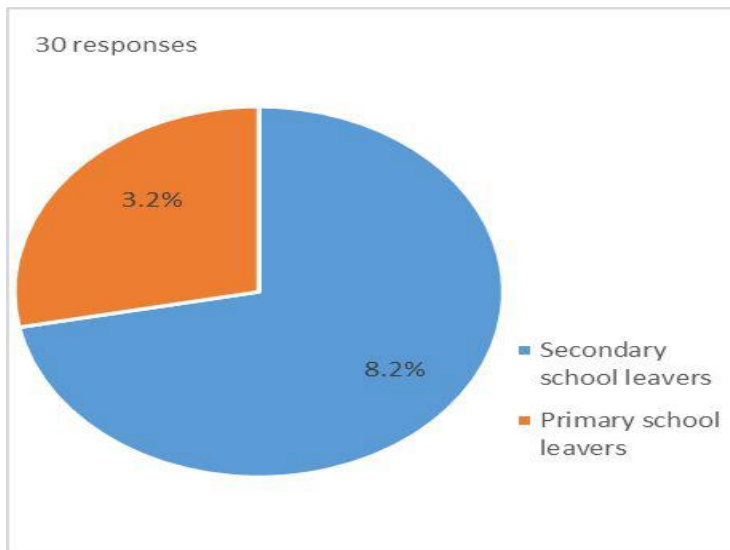


Diagram 5: Motivation for learning the Chinese language: social mobility (11.1%); interest in Chinese language and culture (16.7%); scholarship (16.7%); business (22.2%); employment (27.8%)

Diagram 6: HSK level

HSK 1 and 2 (0%); HSK 3 (5.6%); HSK 4 (38.9%); HSK 5 (50%); HSK 6 (5.6%)

Diagram 7: Duration of study

1 year, 6 months (68.1%); above 1 year (14.4%); under 1 year (7.3%); under 6 months (5.9%); slightly above 2 years (4.3%)

Diagram 8: Job

translator/interpreter (76%); miner (2%); personal assistant (2.5%); secretary (3.9%); manager (6.5%); receptionist (2%); accountant (2%); computer operator (2.1%); storekeeper (3%)

Diagram 9: Line of business (LOB)

mining (36%); toiletries (3.6%); footwear (3.6%); travel bag (2.4%); polyethylene (3.2%); restauranting (12.3%); casino (5%); import-export trade (7.3%); retailing (11.2%); hoteliery (11.5%); fishery (4%)

Diagram 10: Starting salary

N 150,000- N 180, 000 (29.5%); N 180,000- N200,000 (66.4%); N 200,000- N 250,000 (4.1%)

Diagram 11: Current salary ranges

N350,000- N400,000 (13.5%); N200,000- N250,000 (10.4%); N250,000, N300,000 (19.7%); N300,000- N 350,000 (56.5%)

Diagram 12: Quality of HSK training at CI-NAU

Satisfied (62.3%); somewhat satisfied (31.4%); not satisfied (6.3%)

Diagram 13: Duration of job hunt: short (89.6%); long (10.4%)

Diagram 14: Employment facilitator

Groups (33.3%); teachers (16.7%); school mates (5.6%); agents (45%)

Diagram 15: Motivation for attending the Confucius Institute instead of going to university:-

Wanted to focus on the Chinese language (38%); HSK was cheaper than degree (22.2%); lack of sponsorship (16.7%); not aware of the existence of the department of Chinese Studies (5.6%); could not pass the university examination (6.2%)

There were other responses: “I didn’t want to go through the stress of going to university;” “I don’t have any secondary school certificate;” “I didn’t pass SSCE (secondary school) exams;” “Going to university wasn’t necessary for me;” “A friend advised me to go to the Confucius Institute instead of university.”

Diagram 16: Regret for not pursuing a university degree: regretful (9.5%); not regretful (90.5%)

Diagram 17: Impact of lack of university degree on upward mobility somewhat limited upward mobility (5.5%); actually limited upward mobility (16.7%); did not limit upward mobility (77.8%)

Diagram 18: Severest challenges due to lack of university degree: lack of confidence for self-assertion (30.1%); weak negotiating power (5.4%); lower starting

salary vis-à-vis those with a degree (11.4%); limited access to self-development opportunities (53.1%)

Diagram 19: Discrimination due to lack of university degree: yes (17.7%); no (35.2%); not applicable (47.1%)

Diagram 20: If yes, how?

Low self-esteem; exclusion from high positions; exclusion from overseas business trips; constrained ability to assert self; discrimination from colleagues; discrimination from Chinese employers

Diagram 21: Plans to pursue a university degree in future: yes (77.8%); no (22.2%)

Diagram 23: If no, why?

1. Education is no longer important
2. Just make money, nobody cares about your educational background
3. Education is not necessary (by the most respondents)
4. There is no time for it [education]
5. I need to focus [on what I am doing] and make money
6. Education is for women

Findings

This research has produced interesting findings about the profile of the students of the Confucius Institute who have not gone to university or any other institution of higher learning. The findings are divisible into core findings and subsidiary findings. While the former is about precarity, the latter is about other sociological

issues---access to education (gender disparity in educational attainment), persevering pursuit of self-realisation, etc.

Two-thirds of the informants were female, reinforcing the widespread concern about the alarming gender gap in educational attainment in most developing countries. Female education is a front-burner issue in most developing countries; and some of the factors responsible for gender-equitable education systems in those countries have been identified as being cultural and religious. The numerical preponderance also indicates that most Nigerian males who could not go to university will likely travel out of the country (*japa* in Nigerian parlance) or start their own business rather than pursue a non-degree education.

The HSK programme of CI-NAU provides equal opportunities for self-realisation for all active ages of society. Enrollment at the Institute, unlike Nigeria's university admission, does not have any age requirements, as evidenced by the fact that 28% of the sample had not schooled beyond the primary school. The percentage only shows the enormous educational barrier facing most school-age persons in Nigeria. The responses for the motivation to learn Chinese at CINAU highlights this challenge with the fact that 66.7% did not study Chinese with the intention of using it for self-actualisation. This percentage is unacceptably high; it also begs the question as to the reason for which 55%

combinedly studied the language up to HSK 5 and HSK 6.

The completion period of CI-NAU's HSK programme is two years. (Those who overstay the period are required to renew their enrollment with full tuition fee). The classes, each with an average size of two hundred of fifty, thin out as the students go on to the next. As can be seen, only 4.3% of HSK learners studied for the maximum duration, which is two years. The rest discontinued their study in order to go and work. The high truncation rate among the category of CI-NAU students being scoped in this work may account for the high rate of their employment as translators/interpreters. Employment as manager or accountant or secretary should require higher-education qualifications. 5.6% did HSK 3; 38.9% did HSK 4; 50% did HSK 5; 5.6% did HSK 6. 0% did HSK 1 and HSK 2. (The globally acclaimed high standard of the HSK programme at CI-NAU obviates the need for HSK 1 and HSK 2 examinations). The high percentage of examination participation for HSK 5 probably indicates that most of those in the students had plans to seek scholarships to study in China, as HSK 5 certificate is required for most Hanban scholarships.

For the vast majority of informants, studying at CI-NAU was like a straw for a drowning man. Only 38% opted for the Institute for the specific purpose of studying Chinese; the rest were obliged by force of circumstances---affordability, lack of sponsorship,

ignorance about the existence of the degree programme at the university and inability to pass the requisite university entrance examination. 90.5% of the respondents said they had no regrets whatsoever about not having a higher education (see diagram 16). 77.8% said lack of higher education did not limit their upward mobility on the employment ladder (see diagram 17).

Surprisingly, the same respondents admitted severe deprivations and discrimination for not possessing higher education (see diagrams 18 and 19). They also said they would pursue a higher education in future (see diagram 21). These two assertions negate the earlier ones about not having a higher education and not encountering stunted mobility.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Confucius Institute at Nnamdi Azikiwe University has emerged as the premier Chinese language centre in Nigeria, courtesy of the synergistic output of the dedication of its Chinese lecturers and the determination of its students. It has empowered thousands with Chinese language proficiency. But like a coin, its impact has two sides. The debit side is the disturbing trend of short-termism among its students who have not gone to university or any other institution of higher learning. In fact, an increasing number of the students (both combined programme students and single-programme students) now would rather go to work (去工作) than travel to China to further their studies. To curb the trend, the Institute should incorporate career counselling for its

students with a view to reorienting them towards long termism.

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