

Transcript Go Global ED Podcast Episode 9 – Karen Awura-Adjoa Ronke Coker, a PhD student at the University of Florida who participated in the Title VI Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) fellowship program through the University of Florida. Karen studied Wolof, the native language of Senegal for two years and tells u more about her experience, the value of speaking the language of communities in which you wisht o engage and she provides tips and encouragement to others seeking language training in less commonly taught languages.

**[Intro - Host/Amy]**

Welcome back to the Go Global ED podcast brought to you by the International and Foreign Language Education Team. Also known as IFLE in the Office of Postsecondary Education at the U.S. Department of Education. My name is Amy Marrion and today I'll be your host. On the Go Global ED Podcast we speak with IFLE grant and fellowship recipients to highlight their experiences, discuss issues in international and foreign language education, and explore the long-term value and impact of IFLE programs.

Today I speak with Karen Awura-Adjoa Ronke Coker, a recipient of two consecutive foreign language and area studies fellowships also known as FLAS from 2019 to 2021. The Fellowship Program provides funding to U.S. institutions to assist undergraduate and graduate students undergoing training in modern foreign languages and related area in international studies, or with the international aspects of professional or fields of study.

Karen's fellowship provided opportunities to increase her understanding and proficiency of Wolof, the national language of Senegal. Currently, Karen is a PhD student at the University of Florida College of Public Health and Health Professions in the Department of Environmental and Global Health.

Karen, welcome to the podcast.

**[Karen]**

Thank you for having me, Amy. I am really excited and grateful to be here.

**[Host/Amy]**

So, to get us started, could you tell us a little bit about yourself, how you became interested in language learning and learning Wolof

**[Karen]**

So, my interest is the language, I think I could say, like being born within an environment where multiple languages are spoken. And so I am from Ghana, which is in West Africa. I was born here in the U.S., but I lived in Ghana specifically in Accra for eight years with my grandmother and extended family, aunts, and

uncles. And so, in Ghana, though, the colonized language is English there are a plethora of other languages.

And so, I was surrounded by Akan, Ewe, Ga. So, I would say that as a young child who is, I know my absorption and probably there is a clinical and scientific space whereas a young person I just absorbed all those languages and also just like fell in love with language as a whole. And so, growing up and just being within that academic environment space, I wanted to learn French.

And while in Ghana I had been taking French language courses and so coming back to the United States, French was something that I wanted to continue to learn and get really well acquainted with. And so that love for language and knowing that it was a space and communicate passion not only just within my personal environment, but then starting to think about as I got older within my research interests and my academic interests and my professional space and passions, I knew that if I had a superpower, I would learn all the languages that I could.

And so, when I got into college, I was able to continue my French language studies. I studied French in high school as well to courses in that. But coming into my grad graduate school is when I was able to start thinking about, you know, being able to include other African languages outside of God, in the Ghanaian languages. I spoke into my skill set.

And so, coming into the U.S. and into my program I got the opportunity to learn about the FLAS through my advisor mentor, my Ph.D. mentor. And I applied for it and is because in the context I'd already been studying and done work in Senegal for my master's thesis and realized what a great opportunity I could give me in terms of being able to learn Wolof, which is such a key component of the in Senegalese community, and also being able to learn another African English just made my heart so far, because I know that the African continent as a whole is an a monolith.

It's an environment where there's so much culture and diversity. And the five gave me an opportunity to add that to my skillset, but also just as a person and as a human, just being able to explore another African country and another African language and be welcomed and feel at home with really part of that experience. And I think language brings different people together.

Food brings people together; music brings people together. And so being able to learn the language is, to me, building community and getting a lens and an opportunity to really to see people.

**[Host/Amy]**

I love that you said if you could have any superpower, you would learn as many languages as possible.

**[Karen]**

Yeah.

**[Host/Amy]**

And also, obviously. Yeah, another really great point. Language is a great way to build community. So, you speak French, you now speak Wolof, you speak a couple of other languages. Could you tell us a little bit more about your time in Senegal and your research interests?

**[Karen]**

Yeah, So during 2015 to 2017, I had the opportunity and privilege to really meet someone that I consider a great mentor to me. Dr. Gregory Jenkins, who is at Penn State, and he is a meteorologist, and he has worked in Senegal for 20 plus years looking at climate impact and different levels. And so, he afforded me the opportunity to work with him and go to Senegal for the first time.

And so that opportunity of being in Senegal there I spoke French created this space to say like, you know, being able to learn Wolof would be a great opportunity for me to really get to know the people of Senegal and really supplement and make an environment for my research into that more for. And so, my research interests have always surrounded.

I'm looking at health and looking at social and environmental conditions that impact people's health, primarily in West Africa. And so, I know that culture and tradition are connected to two language and people. And so being able to being able to speak to people in a language that means a lot to them, and it's part of their daily life that is important and I think it creates that same space of safety and trust for people to know that you speak their language and you're meeting them where they are rather than them having to meet you where you are, especially coming outside of their world.

And so, my word, it's surrounding community and being able to speak with community about how they experience climate change and different environmental conditions and their social level as well. That impact their health. If I'm not able to speak their language, how will I be able to really understand them? Right. It's great to have a translator, but I think being able to at least share and show the intention of you taking the time to learn their lingo, their language and how they communicate and what makes them feel comfortable and free is really important.

So, the experience of a twice created that opportunity for me to really learn a language. But learning that language created a space for me to learn the culture. You know, the will of cultures is so rich and so attached to the language and what they speak in terms of the traditions and who they are And so that language study really opened this space for me to see other similarities between my own identity as a Ghanaian.

And as an African, and to touch to also see how language creates that environment for shared exchanges and to also see similarities and unique, unique differences as well.

**[Host/Amy]**

Yeah, so many great points. I understand that you are looking at health and climate change and issues like that and working with communities primarily in Western Africa and Senegal. So, language definitely is so important when you're trying to build rapport and work in different communities. So, could you tell us about your experience on the FLAS program? What was the program like, what is your Wolof proficiently like now? now? Any stories or things that you'd want other folks to know about the program?

**[Karen]**

Yeah. I will first say that for me, my language learning process excels when I'm in country. So, I know some people when they learn language, you know, being able to learn their grammar or being able to be

in a structured environment where they are able to, you know, write, and learn the more kind of structure things is easier for them.

For me, I'm a practical person. I have to practice. I have to be around it. I have to be in it. And so, I would say that, you know, the FLAS program here you are in this support from the Center for African Studies has been amazing because when I first got funded from the Paris my first semester, there are like four of us in the Wolof professor here is Senegalese.

And so, he really took his time to share not only the culture but the language and, you know, from pronunciation to learning. And so, I had this list for one year. And then I also was able to apply for the summer program because the Center for African Studies here you have a great African language program actually as well that occurred in the summer.

And so, I was able to then have a professor who was also Senegalese who not only was teaching me the language, but also teaching you the culture. Right. And so that experience of FLAS was that it wasn't just learning grammar, you know, learning the structure of sentences, but really learning the I, you know, the culture and the components that develop and are so important within the world.

Context. And so, I know I received great, great support from not only the Center for African Studies. Here you are, but just my classic dance has been really amazing because of the resources in terms of what my university and Center for African Studies provided me with really great quality teachers. And then last summer in the midst we also had COVID and so the center really was able to quickly have the athlete program put in an online platform where we were still able to engage with our professors, but they also were able to add a dimension of being able to talk to people outside of U.S.

Right. Because of that technological accessibility. I also then had the opportunity with last summer to be able to use that to be in-country and I think I was the first one you up, I think with the athlete program as in as well to continue like my well I study so I started at the beginning level. I never knew anything about all of you know I taken a few courses during my masters, but I would I forgot all of that.

So, I was I started at the beginning level of class in 2019 and steadily moved down to like advanced and so as I advance and as I got slides, I became the only student but still continue to have the support from Center for African Studies and FLAS funding to continue and being able to be in-country. While I was a FLAS fellow, I think it's an ever-required thing but it's something that you're able to do in this summer.

And again, Center for African Studies is very accommodating to find a professor for me I was in country, I was doing predissertation work and I was able to speak the language and be with the community. I was in practice my Wolof and say, you know, I'm not that great, but you know, me being here is really improving and you are helping me with knowing my mistakes and I am a practical person.

I want to be surrounded, I want to hear the language being spoken, I want to see I just don't want to like just to read a book, but I really want to experience the culture and see how attached that is. To the language that I'm studying. And so, I'm really grateful because that really the past from 2019 to 2021 the five eyes not only supported my language study, but it also supported my funding for my Ph.D.

Right. So is like this two and one where I'm able to pursue my Ph.D. journey, which has been such an experience. You know, we've all been going through COVID and so being a student is always being within

this environment of a pandemic, but being able to have these moments of, you know, financial support from the FLAS and pursue a dream of doing this page.

The experience has been very enriching because I get to learn a language in a context in an environment that I've always wanted to pursue when it comes to health and working on the continent, but then also being able to have full pay for my funding for the past for the first two years of my PhD experience. It's very, very awesome.

**[Host/Amy]**

Yeah, that's very it sounds like you've made so much progress with the language over the last two years. And I know having that experience, I guess this summer being able to be there was really helpful as you continue to advance. So, I was curious, you had mentioned that you went to Senegal, I think maybe a few years ago. Is that right? And then.

**[Karen]**

Yeah, around 2016, yeah.

**[Host/Amy]**

Okay. And then you went back this summer, so could you talk about any like was there any major difference now that you knew a lot more about the language? I know you were obviously able to communicate better.

**[Karen]**

Yeah, I think when I went in 2016, I also was in a different context. I was in the capital city of Dakar and so I could, I could use like more French to navigate, and I didn't really rely as much on my Wolof that I was being taught. So, I think definitely last summer being able to be in Senegal, I really worked to just use Wolof even though like I completely at the moment like messed it up and didn't know what areas they go like well, you know, like, you know, the basics of like introduction of like known their neck.

So, I got like I got more comfortable in terms of the greetings that are so essential in Wolof. That I definitely did not have in 2016. And also, within last summer I was in a more rural context, so more people spoke Wolof rather than French. And so that environment really challenged me. Right. And I think also I just had to be very vulnerable and say this is this process.

Like I didn't grow up in this culture, I didn't grow up in this language environment, but it did feel like home. It felt like Ghana is just a different language. And I think it was more enriching for me because I could, I could understand even and even though I could fluently speak as quickly as everyone was who was around me, everyone was very kind to let me mess up or finagle my Wolof language.

But I really, I really felt supported by the community that I created. And I think that was because I now had more vocabulary. I now knew more jokes, so I could kind of like joke around and feel welcome to like lot of people are already welcoming. And so, I think there's a huge difference in terms of me going last summer because of my two years, almost two years of Wheel of Training, because I was it was more nuanced.

I had two different lenses of really hadn't dug into different culture aspects of life, you know, readings that I've done about specific Wolof key people and the different the legacies and history of the Wolof people and the area I was in. So, it was more enriching, and I was more informed because of my language learning class afforded me that it was it. It's been this experience where I have not only learned the language, but I learned the history. I've learned about who the Wolof people are, I've learned the food I've learned, you know, and to also critically think about how language facilitates people's ideas and who people are and how that's greatly attached to their lived experiences and how that also informs how I think about my research questions and my PhD and my dissertation in that I and I have been able to have a more enriched and clear understanding of why do I want to look at climate change and how does this impact this community?

And specifically thinking about how within the whole context and Wolof language, how do they describe these events such as crime and how do they experience these things in their health? Right, because how people describe things in their language doesn't translate all way or does it? Something in English does in translate into Wolof, because that context is a part of their lived experience.

So, there is, you know, there's not a word or there's not a phrase within someone's culture. And so, you can't force that because that's not perhaps something they experience they may have. Are there ways in which they describe it? Learning Wolof really has given me this enriching experience that I probably would not have had in my experience if I hadn't been funded by FLAS and I hadn't had the opportunity to learn Wolof, and especially in a global health environment.

I think you can't do research globally if you don't know the community that you want to work with. It's like, what's your intention? Why do you want to work in a context of helping people who are dealing with, you know, legacies of health outcomes that are connected to colonial legacies, you know, not just on the African continent, but you don't understand, even if it's not a different language, right?

You are able to meet people where they are really doesn't form you in the work that you want to do. And I think communication and is a big piece of that. And if people aren't able to communicate with you or you're not able to listen to them, communicate with you about what they're experiencing and what they have gone through, then your work means nothing.

In the sense that there's not going to be an outcome that is beneficial for that community. You are rather being abstracted for the work that you want to do. Right? And so, I think what I'm saying is that this opportunity of being able to learn this different language, I think is very critical in this space that I'm in.

And I think everyone should be able to have the opportunity to learn a language if they're able to.

**[Host/Amy]**

For sure. Yeah, access is probably one of those key points. So, I did want to go back to something you mentioned previously. It's been really great hearing your journey from doing your master's and going to Senegal and speaking French and then learning about Wolof. You had mentioned a mentor, and I think sometimes mentors can be really important for people who are trying to figure out what's the next step or where they're going in their studies or whatever it might be.

So, do you have any suggestions for students or people who are looking for a mentor and how they could use mentorship to help figure out their next steps, whether that be with language learning or international studies or their Ph.D.?

**[Karen]**

I think mentorship is a process. I'm also really learning as I do, right, because they are big people have different mentors in different areas in their life. And so, I think this for me, me having a really good understanding of mentorship started to really blossom for me in my master's program like I had during undergrad. But I think I really was able to experience or even desired wanting a mentor, but I really was able to have that in my master's in Dr. Jenkins because he created that environment for me to be free to ask questions and for him to also share his experiences.

And I think one piece about mentorship is being bold to ask and also being able to ask the people that you are interested in mentorship to ask them, you know, what does mentorship look like for you so that they can share what their views are on mentorship. And then you can share like I would like to be your mentee, but even what that looks like, this is new for me.

And so, what has been your experience and what can our experience be? And also have a kind of fluid aspect to it, or if you're really specific to wanting to get somewhere in life, if you're able to identify someone who's already in that space, or if you're able to identify people who are not even near where your interests are, I think it's good to have a diversity of that right case.

For me, I think that having mentorship and mentors who are in different places enriches your ideas because if you're able to share something that you're interested in and someone else is then necessarily in that space, but they are in a different environment, they may share a viewpoint or a lens that you hadn't thought about. And then you do have someone who is direct in the space that you want to be.

**[Host/Amy]**

Yeah, those are all really great points. So, when it comes to mentorship, being bold, being willing to ask, reach out, talk about what mentorship looks like, and keeping in mind a diversity of viewpoints and perspectives from the folks who you might be talking to. And it's an ongoing process and you're probably going to have a variety of mentors if you if that's something that folks are interested in, and it can really help you expand your or lifelong learning.

It could say, right?

**[Karen]**

Yeah, you are lifelong learning.

**[Host/Amy]**

I just have a couple of more questions. I think this is all been a really wonderful conversation with lots of very interesting insights into your language learning journey. So, but how do you see language skills being used in your career?

**[Karen]**

Yeah, language is going to be very important to me. You know, I, I hope, and my goal is to continue to build my Wolof language skill set. Though I'm not currently in Senegal, right now, I'm here in Florida. I'm still connected to my community, you know, my community and my friends that I'm started to build. And the network I've built in Senegal I practice my Wolof and, you know, talk to them about my work because, you know, I'm hoping to be in Senegal for my dissertation work, a part of my dissertation work.

And so, I know Wolof will be part of my life for a very long time. And it's something that I want to continue to work at I would love to learn Arabic or other languages as well. So, I, I don't have, I'm open in terms of the capacity within my, my research as I continue on this journey and after wherever I land, whether it's in teaching and doing research I know that language is going to be a big component of my work and I really want to take opportunities that give me the chance to really hone in on that language skillset.

Just like, you know, in this field training, I think flax is a language class is this language training piece and especially in the global health space and the environment that I'm in, I think language skills and being able to have this funding opportunity to help build that is so critical and I'm grateful that I've had it.

**[Host/Amy]**

Do you have any advice for people that are studying foreign languages or specifically Wolof, and also any advice for students who are considering applying for a flagship program?

**[Karen]**

Please apply. I think for me, I always think a big piece of my life. You'll never know if you never try. I've every now. Right. What are you going to lose if you're asking someone that I know or you apply and they say yes or no, you still did it right?

And so, I, I would say my advice is just go for it. Don't be afraid. You know, if you're passionate about it and something that you're intentional about wanting to pursue things that are aligned for you. So definitely, you know, make sure that you do your research in terms of what language you want to study and then also attach it to why do you want to study it so that, you know, when you're writing out your statement that also comes out in that, you know, your intent and I think if you want if you want something and you want to have it as part of your life, I think this program especially when it comes to African languages and are the indigenous languages that the FLAS program affords the opportunity for people who may come from that community but don't know that language or one it added in their research or being able to travel in and build community and be part of community. Go for it. Don't. Don't be afraid. You know, make sure to reach out to people, you people who are interested in what reach out to me.

I'd love to share my experience because being able to learn another language also has amplified by the African languages that I already speak right and being able to see connections and also being able to see this space where there are African scholars who are teaching African languages, also teaching about African culture and history, and to be surrounded by our brilliant people who are continuing to document and share the language of a continent that we colonized continues to be.

And also, where there there's so much wealth of diversity where it's not just like teaching your bad and tree and you know, all these Africa languages that are so rich and so beautiful, why not apply for it if we have that opportunity? I think also access to students and people who don't want to learn my good friend or Spanish or German or why are these European languages like you have that opportunity with FLAS to be funded by the Department of Education to learn an African languages, that is really wonderful.

**[Host/Amy]**

Yeah. Hopefully more institutions will continue to apply for the funding so more and more students can take advantage of it. And something to remind our listeners, too, is that you started Wolof essentially as a beginner about two years ago. Right? So don't be discouraged if you don't have a long background in the language that you're interested in learning, there's definitely this type of opportunity that can help you improve your proficiency.

**[Karen]**

Yeah.

**[Host/Amy]**

So, Karen, is there anything else you'd like to add?

**[Karen]**

Yeah, I would just say, like, you know, if you if you are an undergrad student or graduate student, you know, go to a FLAS if your institution has if the institution doesn't have it to speak with their Center for African Studies and say, 'hey, you know, there's this FLAS opportunity that I'm interested in, how can it happen for me? How can I have the opportunity to apply for it?' And if your institution doesn't have it and you are pursuing graduate school and you're interested in African languages, you know, UF has such a great Center for African Studies program. So be able to do your research. Don't limit yourself and don't let your environment limit you as to what you can do and what you can accomplish.

**[Host/Amy]**

Okay, Karen. Well, thank you so much for joining us on the podcast. This has been a really wonderful conversation and we appreciate you taking the time to talk about your experience and encouraging others to get involved in the FLAS program.

**[Karen]**

Thank you for having me, Amy, and thank you to the Department of Education. Thank you so much.

**[Outro IFLE]**

Thanks for listening to the Go Global ED Podcast. A production of the International and Foreign Language Education Office at the U.S. Department of Education. Be sure to follow us on Twitter at Go Global ED. And subscribe to our newsletter to learn more about upcoming podcast episodes and other IFLE updates.

### Guest Bio:

Karen Awura-Adjoa Ronke Coker was a recipient of two consecutive Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowships, also known as FLAS, from 2019-2021. The FLAS program provides funding to U.S. institutions to assist undergraduate and graduate students undergoing training in modern foreign languages and related area or international studies or with the international aspects of professional or fields of study. Karen's fellowship provided opportunities to increase her understanding and proficiency in Wolof, the national language of Senegal. Currently, Karen is PhD Student at the University of Florida, College of Public Health & Health Professions in the Department of Environmental and Global Health.