THE GROWTH AND CHALLENGES OF VIRTUAL LEARNING OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA IN TIMES OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Research Article

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Abstract

The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic caused a sharp change in the educational practice world over as schools and institutions of learning are forced to seek alternatives to teaching styles. Learning centers were shut down to follow the order of social distancing, as a precautionary measure against the infectious virus disease that has rampage the world. This paper studies the professional consequences of the challenges fronting the English language teaching in Nigeria in the period of coronavirus pandemic otherwise known as "Covid-19". It also offers how the needs and goals of the learners can be met in the period of the mandatory homestay. The article collects, collates, and reviews the data that comes up in the Learn at Home Program (LHP) webpage which is created for the purpose of continuing education in the time of "Covid-19". A survey of the participants' responses was also conducted to investigate the efficacy and challenges that they encountered during the online delivery through the use of a variety of media stations on different topics of secondary schools in Nigeria. The paper, after pitching the challenges of this virtual instruction at the time of the pandemic, proffers certain solutions that can boost the efficacy of virtual education generally in Nigeria.

Keywords: challenges, teaching, coronavirus, pandemic, e-learning.

1. Introduction

At present, teachers and educational practitioners founded themselves managing virtual classrooms every day, communicating with their learners over Information and communication technology (ICT). The traditional media; Radio and Television (TV), various social media platforms, and other internet facilities allow education to be inculcated from a distance to over 1.5 billion learners affected by school closures due to the Covid-19 pandemic (UNESCO, 2020). Despite many challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic most academic and even non-academic institutions around the globe are forced to fully engage in online learning, in line with their attempts to deliver quality and equal education. Hence, the research argued and provided evidence that online learning increases the retention of information (UNESCO, 2020). Social media gives affordance for the development of intercultural and socio-pragmatic awareness and takes less time. Due to the tools employed by social media, learner's autonomy is highly established as the language learner and user identities interplay with particular literacies (Reinhardt, 2018). And now, for the first time, e-learning stands a chance to make a mark that has never been precedent as the changes coronavirus have caused might be here to stay.

It is no longer an assertion that the Internet has greatly influenced language teaching and learning for over the past two decades, as evidenced by a substantial and growing body of research in a variety of fields, particularly, Applied linguistics including second language acquisition (SLA), literacy studies, discourse analysis, language pedagogy and assessment, studies, computer-mediated communication (CMC), and sociolinguistics (e.g. Warschauer, & Healey,1998; Prensky, 2001; Juffs, & Friedline, 2014; Lai, 2017; Mirici, 2019; Sauro, & Zourou, 2019; Xu and Wenfei, 2020).

ICT is rapidly growing and this affords the learning of language the opportunities to expand beyond the traditional classrooms (Reinders & Benson, 2017). The age of the internet today has made the growing young learners become digital citizens; as young learners today are growing up in the age of the Internet as digital natives (Xu & Wenfei, 2020; Prensky, 2001). The ongoing process of increasing manifestation of second language learning outside of the traditional learning settings (Godwin-Jones, 2018) necessitates different researchers, especially Technology Enhanced Language Learning (TELL) scholars, in making numerous attempt to address the issue taking into cognizance the variations that exist in various learning contexts as observed by Lee, (2019). However, Xu & Wenfei (2020) observe the scarcity in research about language learning outside the classroom as enhanced by technology despite the challenges posed by the new learning mode.

Now, social media is increasingly becoming an omnipresent in everyday life due to the trending technology. Research has argued that this paves for the emergence of the interplay between instructional methodologies, learner styles, and cultural usage of technology. These stimulate continued investigation on how social media is used as it can be strengthened, triggered, weakened, or annulled (Xu & Wenfei, 2020). However, the role of social networking sites in language learning and instruction cannot be overemphasized. It increases the power of speech through online conversation in any language learning activity as researches argued that when social networks are applied in the language learning the learning becomes less stressful and more socially enjoyable (Xu & Wenfei, 2020).

Research has argued that educational television is a vital asset for the learning process particularly for children that learn in an informal setting whether it is during their preschool period or beyond (Lavigne, et al, 2015). Having learners to engage in watching television and comprehend the message requires a chain of actions viz; the adept attention, decoding of the media message. It also requires chronicle comprehension skills from the learners' part. Lavigne, et al, (2015) maintain that children below the age of two years may have difficulty using the televised educational programs to guide their behavior with complete efficacy which is described as the video deficit. However, educational TV can become a powerful tool in making learners, especially children learn better. But, in a feat to achieve such, the Edu-TV programs have to be designed with specific educational objectives that are research-based and proven to be in pursuance of the academic achievement of the learners as well as their social behavior.

In summary, this study aims to investigate the challenges and perceptions of the learners of English language education who receive lessons virtually due to the closure caused by the pandemic. It further shows the results of the investigation by discussing the variables and providing insightful recommendations for the overall conduct of online classes in Nigeria within the period of the pandemic.

1.1. Nigerian Education System and the Coronavirus Pandemic

As the index case of Covid-19 (otherwise known as coronavirus pandemic) was confirmed in February 2020 and reported to the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) subsequent

developments led to the indefinite closures of all learning centers and institutions in the country. The school closures have worsened an already troublesome learning crisis in response to the coronavirus pandemic. Estimation shows that about 80 million learners from kindergarten to colleges and universities across the 36 states of the federation including the federal capital territory (FCT) have now missed more than four months of schooling (FME, 2020).

In a bid to contain the spread of the coronavirus, the Federal Ministry of Education (FME) in Nigeria announced the temporary close-down of all schools in the country effective from March 23, 2020. This has educationally, placed an unexpected risk to learners' protection and wellbeing. The hardest-to-reach learners and the already out-of-school are even the most affected in one way the other. It can further be aggravated as some of these young learners may not return to school even after the pandemic or otherwise. The recent improvements and gains the government has made in the education sector are argued to be at the risk of being overturned. Although, the Nigerian government has attempted to continue the education process through virtual the coronavirus pandemic has postured challenges in the delivery process of education to all.

Even though there is no enough evidence, at the moment, to measure the extent of the impact of school closures due to the challenges posed by Covid-19 in Nigeria, but we can hypothetically guess that the longer the time schools stay close the more the rampaging effect against the education system of the country. Hence, the impacts of it on the learners' learning processes, their protection, safety and motivation are growing day by day. It is noteworthy to mention that educational institutions provide much more than teaching learners how to count, read, or write but also render health services, nutrition, social, psychosocial, mental and moral support to all kinds of learners (Osher et al., 2014). Therefore, the lengthy schools' closures are not without ominous costs on the country's fragile educational system.

There is the more exhaustive negative implication of school closures on the vulnerable children; children living with disabilities, children living in conflict zones, children living in remote areas and those without either family support networks or online media or any kind of distance learning process to support their education. All these are hindrances to the realization of Sustainable Development Goal 4 that is vested on inclusive and quality education which the government yearns for (FME, 2020). If learners are deprived access to school due to the pandemic there is expected deterioration in the system as facilities and measurements for the delivery of quality education is weakened unless there is an effective response from the government.

The closures can further aggravate the poor educational performances of some states as there exists a lack of resilience in their educational system as observed by FME, (2020). Invariably, there also exist some opportunities in the response to Covid-19 that is inherently available from the resources of global initiatives to support the coronavirus pandemic response which can be pulled by the Nigerian government to broadly address the established weaknesses of its education system and enhance its purpose and resilience.

With the above situation in the country, the Nigerian government was urged to reopen schools as soon as possible by different groups and people (FME, 2020). This is to reduce the risk of many social vices that prompts the society such as teenage pregnancy, child marriage, and violence amongst others. Therefore, in answering the calls of continuity of education the government weighs its strength widely on the e-learning program. Other facilities like the smartphones, radio, and television programs, learning printed-materials surfaces all over with fluctuating success. The pandemic also provides opportunities for educational stakeholders to revolutionize breakthroughs to help the system.

1.2. The Growth of e-Learning during the Pandemic.

Fundamentally, before the advent of the coronavirus pandemic e-learning was not a new phenomenon in promoting education in Nigeria and other parts of the world but some educational institutions in Nigeria were mostly using e-learning to promote distance education and lifelong learning (Ajadi, et all, 2008). Consequently, the development of communication technology in Nigeria began in 1886 when a cable connection was established between Lagos and the colonial office in London (Ajadi et all, 2008) but historically the most e-learning techniques adopted many Nigerian institutions of learning are in form of prepared lectures on a CD-ROM that can be played as at the need learner's discretion. (Ajadi, et all 2008) observes that most of these facilities were not interactive enough as compared with when the lecture is been receive in real time over the internet.

The Nigerian government however, under the aegis of FME and the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) set up a distinct "Task Team" in charge for a synchronized education response to the coronavirus pandemic whose major responsibility is to provide information, learning resources and guidance to support learners across the country (FME, 2020). This was done to allow learners of varying degrees to continue their education and personalize learning while they engage in a homestay. The committee has a devoted webpage within the FME's website. The objective is to provide instantaneous guidance on learning resources and also support for monitoring children individualize learning while at home. In the same vein, the 'Learn at Home Program' (LHP) webpage is continuously updated to reflect the level of implementation of the online program.

There are several online resources and options readily available for equitable learning and teaching through a variety of channels across the 36 states of the federation including the FCT. The e-learning systems on the webpage can be tracked to monitor the readily available resources. It gives affordance on the provision of context-appropriate materials that allow learners, teachers, and educational institutions to exploit the advantages of home-based learning systems. Evaluation activities such as assignments, quizzes, homework are also exploited at both on educational radio and TV programs, and online-content learning. In a bid to start their duties preliminary the Committee set up a three-tier plan for their guidance: (a) one-month closure; (b) one to three-months closure; and (c) an extended period of more than three-month closure.

In its efforts the Task Team supports the continuing education program by providing digital learning resources that are under three categories: (a) the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) e-Learning whose portal provides e-materials to engage learners preparing for the forthcoming examinations; (b) the Mobile Classroom App was engaged to open up its lessons and resources to all learners all through the closure period at no cost and (c) School Gate is to allow all primary school learners have access to its courses all through the closure period at no cost..

Subsequent to the above other e-learning resources manifest on the dedicated LPH webpage of the FME general platform which includes: (a) National Open University; (b) Khan Academy; (c) SEASAW; (d) UNESCO's meet the learner approach (SMLA); (e) Teacher development resource hub; (f) Aga Khan foundation resources for educators; (g) British Council; (f) Oracle and (g) Springer scientific books (FME, 2020). In furtherance to these the FGN through the FME also provides distinctive platforms to its unity schools and colleges across the federation specifically one for each section (junior and senior) while state governments embark on the e-learning process by creating online resources peculiar to their states respectively.

In another effort to continue safe and quality delivery of teaching and learning process for Nigerian learners, teachers, as well as educational administrators at levels in the country, the FME mandated all states of the federation to further engage educating their learners through the traditional media of education TV and Radio programs. This is in view of meeting the prescribed requirements and standards of the system through remote learning platform in ensuring the adequate safeguard of the learners' health, safety, and security during the pandemic closure. The states, therefore, make adequate of the TV and Radio stations domiciled in their sates for broadcasting lessons for some core subjects which include (a) English Language; (b) Mathematics, (c)Chemistry; Physics (d) Jolly phonics; (e) other Arts or Humanities and (f) other Sciences depending on the need of the state.

The English language is said to be a major or core subject in the Nigerian education system (FRN, 2013; FME, 2020). It is indeed a core subject without which one cannot proceed to a university or college for attaining tertiary education (Mustapha A.T. & Bostanci, H.B, 2019; Mustapha, A.T, 2019). Nigerian learners consider English not only as an official language but 'A must-pass' subject at an ordinary secondary school level in pursuance of a university degree (Mustapha, A.T, 2019). In view of this fact, therefore, this paper seeks to examine the challenges and strengths of learning the English language through virtual means during the coronavirus pandemic closure of schools in Nigeria as identified in the foregone literature with the following questions:

1. What are the learners' perceptions and attitudes fronting the English language e-learning in Nigeria in the period of coronavirus pandemic?

2. What challenges confront the e-learning of the English language in Nigeria during the coronavirus pandemic?

2. Research Methodology

In this investigation descriptive cross sectional study approach was adopted to gather and analyze data quantitatively. This is modeled to the previous studies conducted that are similar to our study. We employ such a method in order to have descriptive data through which we can offer interpretation by using mathematical facts and subject them statistically and convert the data into knowledge (Burns & Grove, 2005). In the quantitative approach, the data is expressed numerically in view of relating it with a measuring scale to look for correlations and statistical significance of the research questions (Creswell, 2014).

2.1. Participants

A sample of 370 respondents was randomly selected in the online survey and the respondents cut across all secondary school learners of English language who use social media independently or with their parents' gadgets in towns and villages of Kebbi state, Nigeria. The range age of the respondents is between 12 – 18 years. 206 of the participants were male and 164 were female from different schools and socio-economic background within the study area.

Table 1. *Socio-demographic variables of respondents (N = 370)*

Characteristic	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Sex		
Male	206	55.7
Female	164	44.3
Age		
12 years	16	4.3
13 years	65	17.6

14 years	60	16.2
15 years	44	11.9
16 years	69	18.6
17 years	65	17.6
18 years	51	13.8
School level		
Junior (JS 1-2)	81	21.9
Middle (JS 3- SS1)	173	46.7
Senior (SS 2-3)	116	31.4
School location		
Rural	173	46.7
Urban	197	53.3
Monthly Income ₦ (for Parents)		
≥ 50,000	177	47.8
51,000-70,000	66	17.8
71,000-90,000	53	14.3
91,000-130,000	31	8.4
131,000-150,000	22	5.9
151, 000- 200,000	11	3.1
201,000-250,000	7	1.9
251,000 and above	3	0.8

2.2. Instruments

An online survey was used to collect data from the participants through emails (monkey survey), What'sApp messages, and text messages (SMS). However, secondary sources were used to review the already available data narratively. The questionnaire was structured to capture the socio-demographic variables of the participants and their perceptions and thoughts about the ongoing online delivery of English language lessons during the pandemic specifically, and these form the primary sources of our data. 206 participants where contacted through What'sApp while 124 responded via text message and 40 were contacted by email. The multiple-choice questionnaire was designed for the study was shared in all the mediums to the randomly selected participants.

2.3. Procedure

The study, which involved a population of 370 respondents, was conducted during the ongoing virtual delivery of lessons to all secondary school students in Nigeria as organized by the collaborative efforts of FME and UBEC who closed down all learning facilities in Nigeria to safeguard the health and general wellbeing of children, youths, teachers, and educational personnel across the country. For the purpose of this study, which was carried out on a voluntary basis, the required permission was granted from UBEC in Kebbi state, Nigeria. Both the randomly selected participants and their parents or guardians were informed about the aim of the study and they consented appropriately prior to the conduct of the study. Even though there was no physical contact with the participants in the study, the researchers strictly adhered to all ethical issues of anonymity, confidentiality, and avoidance of any harmful incidence technically throughout the investigation from the compilation of data to its interpretation as suggested by Cohen et al., (2011).

3. Results and Data Interpretation

The table (1) above organized the data contained within in order to assign meaning and sense to the socio-demographic data of all the 370 participants. It shows 55.7 percent of the respondents in the study were male (boys) while 44.3 are female (girls). This is an indication that boys are the majority in the school system within the study area. It can easily be noticed that the age of the respondents varies within the range of 12-18 years. This is so as the study involved learners from junior secondary to senior secondary levels. 4.3 is the percentage of learners aged 12 years while the 13 years ages have 17.6 percent. It can clearly be seen that 16.2 percent is for the children who are 14 years old. The 15 years old have just 11.9 percent. 18.6 percent is for the participants that are at age 16 while the 17 years have 17.6 percent. The 18 years old who supposedly are the senior students have 13.8 percent.

For the school level which implies falling under junior or senior secondary school is portrayed in the table as it depicts three sections. The junior-level which is featured as junior secondary 1-2 has 21.9 percent while the middle level that is shown as JS3-SS1 carries the majority of the participants with a percentage of 46.7. The senior secondary level has 31.4 percent. The table further shows the location of the schools were the participants are drawn for the study with the rural schools' participants having 46.7 percent. The majority come from the urban settlement as they have a percentage of 53.3.

Depiction of the participants' parents shows certain differences as the majority of the participants' parents, with 47.8 percent, are low-income earners with just ≥ N50, 000 per month. 17.8 percent is for those parents that earn N51, 000- N70, 000. 14.3 percent of them receive N71, 000- N 90,000 as their monthly income. In addition to that, the table shows 8.4 percent receive N 91,000- N 130,000 as monthly earnings. 5.9 percent of the parents have a monthly income of N131, 000-N 150,000 as the 3.1 percent have N151, 000- N200, 000. Dramatically, 1.9 percent and 0.8 percent have monthly incomes of N201, 000- N250, 000 and N251, 000 ≤ respectively.

Table 2. *Participants' perception about e-learning during the Coronavirus pandemic*

Type of Perception	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1. High Concept	87	23.5
2. Moderate Concept	88	23.8
3. Low Concept	195	52.7

Table 2 shows that participants with a high perception of e-learning during the Coronavirus pandemic have comparatively low-concept (23.5%), followed by those with moderate perception (23.8%) while those with low perception have the highest manifestation of self-concept (52.7%). These the frequencies were significantly different as the percentages showed differences resulted in the variance in perception of about e-learning during the Coronavirus pandemic.

Table 3. *Participants' Perception about English language e- learning*

Type of Perception	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1. High Concept	63	17.0
2. Moderate Concept	118	31.9
3. Low Concept	189	51.1

Table 3 reveals that participants with high perception about English language e-learning (17.0%) are comparatively having lowest manifestation than those with a low perception of 51.1 percent followed by the participants with the moderate perception of 31.9 percent The result of the analysis shows there is a significant difference as indicated by the differences in the frequency distribution and percentages.

Table 4. *Participants' opinion on the ongoing teaching of English online during the pandemic*

Opinion	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1. Interesting	226	61.1
2. Not Interesting	78	21.1
3. Indifferent	66	17.8

Table 4 illustrates the participants' opinion on the ongoing teaching of English online which differentiates their differences by having the majority (61.1%) who are interested in the program against the minority (21.1%) that are comparatively not interested in it. The 17.8 percent is for those participants that are neither interested nor disinterested to take part in the learning program of the English language through the e-learning portal.

Table 5. Basic *challenges of the online teaching of English language during the Pandemic*

Challenges	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1. Computer Literacy (negative)	118	31.9
2. Adaptability (negative)	207	56.0
3. Motivation (negative)	66	17.8
4. Network Issues (negative)	88	23.8
5. Effective time management (negative)	164	44.3
6. Quality of teaching resources (negative)	97	26.2
7. Learning setting (not conducive)	98	26.5
8. Evaluation methods (not appropriate)	105	28.4
9. Feedback (unsatisfactory)	65	17.6
10. Teaching techniques (inappropriate)	76	20.5

Table 6 shows some basic challenges that are associated with the online learning of the English language in Nigeria during coronavirus pandemic. The frequency distribution of 56.0 percent indicates the majority of the virtual learners of the English language during the pandemic find it difficult to adapt to the trending system of online learning. This is followed by 44.3 percent of challenges related to effective time management.

The participants of the e-learning system find it difficult to manage their time as been prescribed by the system. Computer literacy is the 3rd variable with the highest percentile fronting the challenges of online learning of the English language during the period as it has 31.9 percent. It is then, followed by 28.4 percent of the problems connected to evaluating the participants' quizzes and assignments. Learning to set is another issue that poses a challenge

to the learners as the table depicts 26.5 percent of them do not find where they say to learn as convenient. The quality of teaching resources (26.2%) indicates learners' perception of the learning materials. As the learners engage in online activities, they do have continuing technical loss of internet connectivity which shows 23.8percent. In addition, 20.5 percent illustrates that the program is having deficiency in the technicality teachers display while teaching. Motivation and feedback are two variables that are least affected as the table shows their distribution with 17.8 percent and 17.6 percent respectively.

4. Discussion

The research findings first, point that the participants were instrumentally motivated in the ongoing delivery of English language teaching and learning through the e-learning processes. They are motivated not just because they want be safe from the pandemic because it is an entirely new phenomenon to several of them just as their responses indicated across all the variables. Secondly, it points that some of their problems are underpinned by socio-demographic data; the differences that occur between urban-rural setting and family background have a glaring impact on how they perceive issues that they see or encounter in the pursuit of their career as indicated in table 1 above. They are interested in learning English language virtually even though they are struggling to adapt to the new way of doing things

Thirdly, the results indicated the perception of the learners at the satisfying mode as when the percentage of the learners with the high perception is combined with those at the moderate level. This is further buttressing their interest in learning new things despite the challenges of computer illiteracy and technical issues associated with online way of lesson delivery in their environment.

Fourthly, the negative attitudes learner show towards English is connected with the teaching methodology designed in the systems for lesson's delivery. The results indicate a connection between the evaluation the learners undergo and the feedback they receive on their portal, and this is a serious problem that needs to be addressed. Lack of a conducive learning environment forms another stumbling block for the learners as resulted indicated a significant percentage of the learners are not happy with their learning setting. However, this can be linked with their parental background as they receive all the lessons during the compulsory home stay. Lack of proper feedback can negate opportunities for learners to practice English just like lack of resources as the results have shown. These could have negative effects on the English language e-learners as they strive for its acquisition.

Fifthly, while comparing the socio-demographic data of the participants other factors like age, class level, home setting and economic status are other factors that were found learners general behavior in learning the language. However, some factors affect learners' attitude positively. Specifically, learners have positive attitudes towards. Sixthly, another challenge the learners face in the e-learning of English language is internet networking difficulties. Learners that reside in rural areas are mostly affected by this factor. Some rural areas in are so remote that most networks fluctuate their internet services as a result of distance to the booster stations.

5. Conclusion

Evidently, in Nigeria, there is attempted distance education before coronavirus outbreak. Less than 18 percent of geographical coverage in distant learning in the country has now tremendously increased (FME, 2020). The increment is undoubtedly due to the efforts of the government and other international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) to cushion the effect of the pandemic on education. The response plan of the government and the INGOs

was to support learners, teachers, parents, and school communities to thwart further transmission and spread of coronavirus disease and ensure learners continue their search knowledge during their compulsory homestay. However, the English language as a core subject in the Nigerian curriculum is being taught to learners virtually via technological gadgets and other trending technologies. These cannot work without having some challenges. The study investigated these challenges and found out that several are linked to learners' background, study area, their perceptions and prior knowledge of technical know-how. Other several factors that hinder the effectiveness of the English language online learning during the coronavirus pandemic otherwise, known as COVID-19 have also been discussed.

Finally, this research article recommends that the government should ensure the safe opening of all learning centers even during the pandemic but necessary and strict compliance to all health protocols should be provided to all. Guidelines for the safe reopening of schools should be provided and be strictly adhered to. There should be an inclusive return to school for all learners and teachers, irrespective of socio-economic background or distance. The Nigerian government should ensure continuity of learning through the implementation of additional diverse learning strategies and activities that are aimed at the quality learning and wellbeing of learners and all other educational stakeholders. The review in the study establishes the instrumental significance of INGOs and other donor agencies as development partners and their significant roles should be maintained through either bilateral or multilateral relationships. It is pertinent for the FME in Nigeria to cautiously review the teacher education curriculum to include strategies that include and identify the technical realities of education in emergencies. In the same vein, the government should recruit only special teachers that excellently received training to facilitate teaching in such period like the coronavirus pandemic.

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