

Methods and techniques of teaching English and German classes in Nigeria during the Covid-19 pandemic era

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Abstract

We want to infer that language teachers in Nigeria resorted to digital modes of teaching language processes during the COVID-19 era as maintaining social distancing became of paramount importance and the lockdown was implemented by the government of different nations. This study is predicated on the prevalent methods and techniques employed in teaching English and German language processes in the COVID-19 era in Nigeria. The digital methods and techniques have their accompanying challenges, especially in the knowledge delivery of the two foreign languages. Data was collected by interviewing 22 students of some private universities through Focus Group Discussions (FGD 1, 2, and 3) and also using social media/online publications as well as newspapers using qualitative descriptive paradigm. The choice of students of private universities is because the government-owned ones are on strike under the umbrella of Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). The theoretical framework for this study is Ethnography of communication. The participant observation method will be adopted in the framework of analysis of this paper. By the end of this study, we would have established that though there are several techniques and methods of teaching language processes, digital modes became the new normal for language teachers as they were the most used.

Key words: Covid-19, communication, teaching, learning, methods, techniques, English language, German language, virtual, online

Introduction

E-learning has been in the public domain for years but the Covid-19 lockdown and social distancing acted as catalysts that propelled its wide use by language teachers as it appeared to be the readily available medium for teaching and learning English and German language processes in a Corona virus infected environment (Yekini et al., 2020, p.29). Every discipline requires a medium of communication through which it can be disseminated or passed on to listeners which is where language comes in (Flood et al, 2005). This work posits that virtual teaching and learning have become the new normal among language teachers. The paramount importance of language in every human society is indisputable. Language is the exclusive property of man and human beings everywhere in the world communicate with one another by means of language through the exchange of ideas, dissemination of information, expression of knowledge, beliefs, opinions, wishes, threats, commands, gratitude, promises, declarations, feelings, messages, directions and interests, to mention but a few (Eran, 2016, p.1). People of the same speech community interact among themselves and with foreigners to foster international trade, global unity, and peace (Melitz, 2008, p.668). Man's system of communication is by means of language and this makes it an integral aspect of the teaching and learning process of every discipline.

Language is the medium of learning, teaching, commerce, communication, entertainment and cultural transmission. Since learning a language is in line with learning the culture of the language owners, language teachers involve different techniques and methods to enable students understand the particular language as well as the history of the owners of the language, culture, and literature which will give room for proper communication and understanding. According to Schewe

(2020,p.10), *Lehrerinnen und Lehrer, die Deutsch als Fremd- oder Zweitsprache unterrichten, haben meist ein mehrjähriges Studium hinter sich. Sie haben in der Regel Sprachwissenschaft, Literaturwissenschaft und Kulturwissenschaft studiert, sich also wissenschaftlich mit Sprache, Literatur und Kultur auseinandergesetzt* (Teachers, who teach German as a foreign or a second language have most times extending years of study after school. It is a norm for them to study linguistics, literature, and cultural studies, so that they can scholarly deal with the language, literature, and culture). Every sphere of human endeavour undoubtedly has had its share of the effects of the novel Corona virus and therefore reconciled itself with the current situation. Teachers of language in Nigeria were not left out, as they tried different avenues of teaching language processes and settled for virtual modes.

It is worthy of note that the English language is the world's most prevailing language. It is equally the language of international communication and instruction in most countries of the world and therefore very important in teaching different disciplines effectively around the globe. Over the years, authorities and scholars of English and German languages have explored various techniques and methods of effectively teaching the two languages. However, in the Covid-19 era where social distancing is of paramount importance in inhibiting the pandemic, there arose the need for other techniques and methods which are more efficacious in teaching language processes under the circumstances and that is the gap in scholarship that this work is out to fill. This paper aims at projecting viable techniques and methods of teaching language processes in the Covid-19 era while avoiding physical contact as much as possible.

Language teachers employ e-learning synchronously as audio-visuals or asynchronously as audio-oral method to reach out to their students. Most of the methods and techniques of teaching language are adaptations of what used to apply by converting them or making them amenable to virtual modes in compliance with the Covid-19 protocols while some others are innovations geared towards bridging the gaps between students and teachers during the lockdown. However, there are several challenges combating such virtual classes broadly classified under, accessibility, affordability, connectivity, proximity, and interest retention (Anekwe, 2017).

The announcement of lockdown by the Federal government of Nigeria in March 2020 and the accompanying social distancing put a halt to every vocation from economic to education, entertainment, aviation, business, hospitality, and even religious sector. With the intrusion of Covid-19, a new beginning was mapped out for language teachers as they were saddled with the responsibility of creatively generating ideas on how to arrange their lectures to convert analogue modes of teaching to digital or online modes in such a way that the different aspects of language skills such as, listening, reading, writing and speaking are adequately captured. E-learning seemed to be the best option for language teachers considering the large number of classes some of them have to handle and social distancing which cannot be achieved with physical, face to face classes.

It is true that Covid-19 foisted itself on the world unannounced with the concomitant changes occasioned by the paradigm shift in the way things were hitherto done but as human beings, educators and language teachers swung into action by adapting to changing times. E-learning refers to the use of technology in accessing educational curriculum outside the traditional face to face classroom (Editorial, Universities Must Embrace E-Learning, 2020, p.11). E-learning is not altogether new as it has been present in Nigeria for over 20 years. However, the implementation of covid-19 pandemic lockdown left academics with no other option. E-learning though efficacious and smooth, has its own challenges.

The idea of an alternative method of teaching has been the norm in Europe, America, and Asia for years. The Chinese for example, had 22 online platforms for all school levels even before the Covid-19 outbreak. In Nigeria, such strategic platforms were

grossly absent (Salami, 2020, p.12). There is need for the unbundling of the educational system through virtual learning but at the same time, academics should be mindful of the vulnerability of their platforms to psychopaths, cybercrime, and unguarded online behaviors (Aremu, 2020, p.13).

Research methodology

The study adopted the use of Focus Group Discussions (FGD 1,2 and 3) of random sampling of 22 students of two private universities and one state owned tertiary institution namely- Gregory University Uuru, Godfrey Okoye University Enugu and the Nigerian Institute of Journalism Lagos, Nigeria. The participants were allowed to freely recount their experiences about online teaching classes. Their views were properly articulated, analysed and synthesized for the purpose of this research using the qualitative descriptive model of analysis.

Theoretical framework of analysis

This study adopts Ethnography of Communication Theory which employs discourse analysis linguistically in the ethnographic field to decide on communication modes and acts suitable for a particular target group. Ethnography of Communication is a linguistic theory propounded by Dell Hymes in 1962 (Dell, 1962). Originally, the theory was called ethnography of speaking. Dell Hymes first coined 'ethnography of speaking' in his 1962 paper and expanded it in his 1964 article, 'Introduction: Toward Ethnographies of Communications' by adding both non-vocal and non-verbal features of communication to it (Dell,1964). This qualitative research theory is concerned with analysing communication socially and culturally, taking into consideration the belief system of the people. Ethnography of communication simply put, refers to the various aspects of an approach in the direction of grasping language processes through the angle of anthropology. Thomas R. Lindlof and Bryan C. Taylor in their book, *Qualitative Communication Research Methods* opine that "Ethnography of Communication conceptualizes communication as a continuous flow of information, rather than as a segmented exchange of messages" (Lindlof, Taylor, 2002).

For Deborah Cameron, "Ethnography of Communication is the application of ethnographic methods to the communication patterns of a group (Deborah, 2001)". Littlejohn and Foss on the other hand, buttress Hymes postulation that, "cultures communicate in different ways yet all forms of communication need a shared code, communicators who know and use the code, a channel, a setting, a message form, a topic, and an event created by transmission of the message" (Littlejohn and Karen, 2011). Gerry Philipsen holds that, "Each community has its own cultural values about speaking and these are linked to judgments of situational appropriateness" (Philipsen, 1975). Ethnography of Communication is employed in studying the interactions of members of a speech community. This implies that a group of people can create and establish its own speaking norms. The emphasis of this theory is on communication processes in a speech environment. During the Covid-19 era, language teachers in Nigeria as a community of academics sought ways of communicating with their students and eventually settled for online lectures using communication platforms which were readily available and easier to understand and manipulate by teachers and students alike. To impact knowledge on students, language teachers set up WhatsApp, telegram groups and zoom meetings to reach their students. Some took their lectures to YouTube, Go To and Google Meet and gave their links to students to enable them participate in the lecture.

Use of virtual classes in Nigerian universities

The Nigeria situation is such that the virtual mode of online teaching and learning is used more in private universities than public ones. Academic Staff Union of Federal

universities in Nigeria (ASUU) embarked on an indefinite strike on April 9, 2020 before the declaration of Covid-19 lockdown (Ezigbo, 2020, p.1) and did not participate in online classes like other universities. Most secondary schools in Nigeria adopt computer education as part of their curricular, yet were not used to online classes. This poses a big challenge for English and German language students in Nsukka and environs and calls for the intervention of the federal government of Nigeria to implement the Policy of Virtual online teaching processes in both public and private schools. Some private universities in Nigeria like Babcock University, Afe Babalola University, Pan-Atlantic University, Elizade University and Mcpherson University, were engaged in serious academic exercises via digital classrooms during the pandemic because they were already used to virtual teaching and learning and were therefore ready for the digital revolution (Babine, 2020, p.17; Dike, 2020, p.18; and Ojo, 2020, p.17). The use of ICT during the pandemic lockdown came with its own challenges which the universities tried their best to remedy, especially for first year students who had no prior knowledge of online learning in their individual secondary schools and therefore had to be trained (Dike, 2020, p.18). Few state universities like Lagos State University and Kwara State University used WhatsApp platforms to deliver lectures to their students while ASUU remained on strike. Efforts were put in place to configure data to solve the problem of online teaching as the financial implications were much on the lecturers (Belo-Osagie, 2020, p.22). Teaching and learning processes through online platforms were not restricted to universities alone. Virtual modes of teaching were introduced and made available for secondary and primary school students in Nigeria on WhatsApp group platforms, face book, television, and radio broadcast stations (Salami, 2020, p.12). Private primary and secondary schools equally made use of a digital downloadable app known as U Lesson for online teaching whereas public schools relied on radio and television lessons (Dike, Ikegbule, 2020, p.17). Government owned Star TV began home schooling which was aired daily from 9.00am on Monday through Friday on ST kids Channel (StarTimes, 2020, p.46).

Different E-learning platforms used in teaching language processes during the Covid-19 era

Online learning modes are broadly classified under flipped and blended which could be synchronous or asynchronous. Some of the synchronous e-learning platforms or virtual classes used by teachers during the lockdown are adobe connect, Zoom, Google Meet and Go to applications. They are referred to as synchronous because they have time schedules and codes used to log into by users such that any user who misses the scheduled time would be unable to log in or access the class it is over unlike the asynchronous modes like YouTube, WhatsApp, and telegram where students in those language groups can log in and access classes at their convenience. It is important to state here that most schools in Nigeria are just beginning to get used to online communication and learning platforms and surprisingly are more comfortable with the communication platforms which they adopt into their training modes instead of using LMS. Although Learning Management System (LMS), both cloud-based and open source are designed specifically for online learning and training of all kinds for schools, businesses and organizations, many schools ignore it and go for online communication platforms like zoom, google meet, WhatsApp, telegram and Go To, which they are more comfortable with. Some of the cloud-based learning management systems are schoology, docebo, talent, learn upon, SAP litmos, adobe captivate prime, learning pool, inquisiq, ispring, moodle, absorb, loopo and minflash while moodle, open edx, chamilo, canvas and totara learn are open source systems. Although virtual classes have been in existence for some time, many educators shied

away from using them, but the pandemic lockdown left them no choice and so they resorted to online teaching modes.

Challenges of virtual teaching

There are many challenges impeding the teaching of English and German languages during the Covid-19 crisis period broadly categorized under, accessibility, affordability, connectivity, proximity, lack of sufficient power, unavailability of smart phones or lap tops, attention retention and lack of digital netiquette.

Accessibility

One of the challenges of online teaching is lack of accessibility to the internet. Many students complained that they had no access to the internet which made it difficult for them to participate in the virtual lessons conducted by their schools. Some of the study areas especially rural areas have limited or zero access to the internet. Five German language students of ABC Sprachschule, Nsukka who hail from Iogoro in Enugu-Ezike called to inform their tutor of their inability to join the online classes because of network issues. Most of these places lack access to internet connections and power.

Connectivity

The few students who were able to connect to the internet complained bitterly that the network fluctuated badly, making it difficult for them to participate actively in the virtual classes while their data ebbed away. The networks are hardly steady and strong such that the connectivity may not be sustained throughout the duration of the class. Emeka Udaja, a second year student of biological chemistry in Gregory University Uтуру, complained bitterly that he used his MTN SIM card and later, his mother's Glo and Airtel SIM cards to connect to the internet using his universal modem, yet he missed parts of the lecture because the networks were unstable (Focus Group Discussion 1, Friday July 24, 2020).

Affordability

Many students complained of the high cost of data subscriptions. Some students of Gregory University Uтуру lamented that they could not afford to buy data and their parents could not help because the compulsory lockdown made it difficult for them to go out and eke out a living as families had to survive on the little savings they had (Focus Group Discussion 1, Friday July 24, 2020). Most language students in Nsukka missed their online English and German classes because of financial problems buffeting families due to the pandemic. Most of the students could not afford the monthly data bundle which would have enabled them to download materials made available for them on the different learning platforms and also to watch pre-recorded video classes online.

Lack of Sufficient Power Supply

Nigeria is known for constant power outages and epileptic power supply. Many students of Godfrey Okoye University complained bitterly that they could not participate fully in their online classes because of regular blackout. They needed electricity to charge their laptops and phones for the online classes. They were always cut off from the online classes each time their batteries go down and there is no electrical power to have them charged (Focus Group Discussion 2, Monday July 27, 2020).

Proximity

Distance is also a barrier in the teaching of English and German languages as students have to cover some distances from their remote villages to get to town where most of the computer centers are situated. One of the German students, who hail from Umuaba in Enugu-Ezike said he has to climb to the top of valleys or tress to access the internet which is even a dangerous thing to do. The same applies to undergraduate students living in hilly environments in Uturu (Focus Group Discussion 1, Friday July 24, 2020).

Unavailability of Smart Phones or Laptops It is worthy of note that some students have neither smart phones nor laptops which would have enabled them to go online and participate in the online lectures with their mates because they cannot afford them due to the high cost of living in Nigeria. Many parents in Nsukka are low income earners or farmers who do not earn enough to adequately take care of their children and therefore may find it difficult to buy the electronic devices needed for online learning for their children.

Attention Retention and Lack of Digital Netiquette It is difficult to retain the attention of students online as they get easily distracted while attending classes. Their friends and playmates sometimes lurk around while lectures are ongoing. On the other hand, most students navigate between their online classes and social media platforms which they use to entertain and amuse themselves(Focus Group Discussion 3, Thursday July 30, 2020) Josef (2020) gives credence to this thus, *Ich sehe eher die Gefahr, dass der Unterricht durch vermehrten Einsatz von digitalen Medien zum Edutainment, zur reinen Unterhaltung verkommt.* (I rather see the danger that education will reprobate from aggrandizing use of digital media to Edutainment and to pure amusement). Many students lack netiquette and do not conduct themselves properly while online classes are ongoing. Some crack jokes and hail their friends in online classes. It is important that the students discipline themselves to focus on learning the languages instead of misusing the opportunity to tweet and chat with friends and loved ones or post unnecessary messages on the learning platforms, thereby disturbing the online classes.

Recommendations

Administrators in language schools and universities should implore their ICT departments to hold seminars and workshops for language instructors, tutors, teachers, and lecturers on the nitty-gritty of online class management, digital teaching and learning like the ones organized for staff members by the University of Nigeria Nsukka from 14th to 16th September and 12th to 14th October 2020. This will enable them to explore the potentials of virtual classes and platforms like Zoom, Google meet, WhatsApp, Telegram, Go to, Youtube, Adobe Connect and so on. Teachers should be made to understand that what is to be done online is exactly what they do in their classrooms. Digital platforms equally make language learning quite easy as pre-recorded videos and other teaching aids are made available to students online (Zakirova et al. 2020, p.765).

- The Federal Government of Nigeria should enact policies to incorporate online teaching as a prerequisite method of teaching all levels of students as this would aid visually-impaired students too.
- Electricity should be made available to students to enable them charge their laptops and phones for virtual classes.
- Internet connections should be made available and accessible to schools and students at all level of education at very affordable rates.

- It is advisable for English and German language learners who hail from problem areas to upgrade their SIM cards to 4G network which will facilitate easy access to the internet. According to Royal (2020), FG granted Nigerian students' free access to internet subscriptions.
- Government should use mass media to sensitize parents on the need to allow their children join online English and German classes.
- Students should be coached on netiquette to enable them comport themselves appropriately in online classes. Online distractions can be curbed by using self-control app to block unnecessary apps and websites during digital classes.

Conclusion

Methods and techniques associated with digital learning of foreign languages such as English and German languages are not without difficulties. In an attempt to overcome some of these difficulties during the Covid-19 era as observed in this study, language students and teachers were faced with the unavailability of proper digital teaching and learning platforms which made them adapt communication platforms instead, and also man-made problems like lack of electricity, connectivity, high cost of data. They equally encountered a few challenges in listening, speaking, hearing, and writing constraints with digital learning because it is new to them. It was also difficult to access data due to some financial and network constraints. As a way of improving digital learning skills, institutions should endeavour to provide internet friendly environment and proper virtual learning platforms for their teachers and students. Teachers should be trained and re-trained in the use of such virtual teaching platforms annually.

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