E-Learning Challenges and Implementations Strategies for Teaching English Language Courses in Distance Learning Centres in the COVID-19 Era

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Abstract: **Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is viral pneumonia with symptoms such as dry cough, fever, sore throat, dyspnea, body pain, and diarrhea. Considering the spread of this dreadful infectious disease, the federal government instituted COVID-19 suppression protocols such as physical/social distancing in classrooms and also encouraged the use of e-learning facilities to reduce the spread of the virus in all tertiary institutions. To examine the prospects of e-learning in the COVID-19 era, this paper examines the e-learning challenges and implementation strategies for teaching English Language courses in distance learning centres in the COVID-19 era. The objectives of this paper are therefore to: identify the challenges of e-learning implementation and discuss possible strategies needed for proper e-learning implementation for English language courses in distance learning centres in the COVID-19 era. Some basic concepts such as e-learning and COVID-19 were conceptually clarified. Based on the review, it was uncovered that inadequate human capacity, inadequate funding, lack of e-learning infrastructure, ICT and bandwidth constraints, poor electricity supply, and institutional governance are the constraints of e-learning adoption and integration for the teaching English language courses in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) centres in the COVID-19 era. Some ready strategies for resolving these challenges include integration of open sources into e-learning, the establishment of data collection repositories, encouragement of resource sharing among staff, development of partnerships and networks, integration of ICT with the whole curriculum, and evaluation of e-learning practices. To resolve these challenges it is suggestedthat: Open Distance Learning (ODL) centres need to be properly funded by the government to enhance the use of Computer Assisted Learning (CAL) and e-learning systems for teaching English Language courses in distance learning centres.**

Keywords: **E-Learning, English Language Courses, Distance Learning Centres, COVID-19 Era**

I. INTRODUCTION

Learning in the school system has risen beyond the traditional real- time classroom situation where learners have to be physically present at a designated location (class) to gain knowledge and skills from a more knowledgeable person (teachers) (Aina, 2020). However, in recent times, knowledge has risen to the point of integrating Information and Communication Technology (ICT) with classroom teaching and learning. The use of ICTs in the school context focuses specifically on the application of these new technologies in an educational context and environment and serves as a tool for supporting the various components of education. Such components include, among others, teaching and learning, resources management (human, material, financial resources), and admission and examination processes also known as learning assessment (Sharma, Ekundayo & Ng, 2019). One specific form of ICT for promoting teaching and learning in schools is e-learning. Consequently, e-learning environments acts as an interface to provide different means to achieve the learning goals of students.

E-learning is one of the information technology basic skills and concepts as very crucial in education. This is because it adds value to the processes of learning and the organization and administration of learning institutions. It encompasses different types of technologies, which are utilized for capturing, processing, and transmitting data and information, using computer facilities. It is an umbrella term that includes communication devices or applications, encompassing radio, television, cellular phones, computers, network, hardware and software, satellite systems, and so on, as well as the various services and applications associated with them (Kumar, 2016). Although e-learning platforms are exhaustive, some common ones include: Zoom, Microsoft teams, Google hangout (meet), Skype, Bamboo learning, Google classroom, Docebo, WizIQ, Adobe captivate, Elucidat, Blackboard learn amongst others.

These E-learning also helps in reaching geographically dispersed groups, to provide "anywhere- anytime" learning, providing consistency, ensuring compliance with regulations, and improving productivity (Suri & Sharma, 2013). Using an e-learning portal can also be of great help as class assignments can be assigned to the students and also submitted back through the e-learning interface. E-learning is also associated with the new ways of learning that are more cost-efficient than traditional learning strategies. It also allows students to take better control of the process of learning and also provides much more references and learning scopes than the ones provided in the usual textbooks. In recent times, there has been a clamour to use e-learning in most secondary and higher education institutions because of the outbreak of the infectious disease called Coronavirus disease (COVID-19)

(World Health Organization, 2020).

The outbreak of the coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) has resulted in a change in the learning paradigm in most learning institutions. Each country is responding to the same threat using different strategies and this has resulted in differences in the epidemiological curve and

the societal and economic costs of the disease (International Labour Organization, 2020). In Nigeria, the Federal Government deployed the Suppression Strategy as the main policy option over mitigation; advising physical/social distancing for the general population as well as the "Test, Treat, Trace and Isolate" model for confirmed and suspected cases (FGN, 2020; World Health Organization, 2020).

The risk factors for contracting COVID-19 include physical contact with infected persons, visiting crowded places, using public facilities, sharing objects used by the public, and many others. In Edo State, the government commenced a mass screening of a targeted 500,000 persons through various channels such as automated services, websites, Unstructured Supplementary Service Data (USSD) codes, and health facilities as part of its strategy for active case search (Ilesanmi and Afolabi, 2020). The Edo state government laid down control strategies for all public places including secondary and higher institutions of learning. These include the mandatory use of non-medical face masks/ coverings for all persons including students while in public spaces, mandatory provision of handwashing facilities and/or sanitizers and extensive temperature checks in all schools; prohibition of gatherings of more than fifty percent the carrying capacity of each classroom in a school, the physical distancing of students among others (World Health Organization, 2020).

In compliance with the state directives, many institutions suggested the use of e-learning platforms to avoid physical class meetings and respect physical distancing protocols (Aina, 2020). Although, distance learning centres seem to be at the forefront of e-learning capacity

among other tertiary institutions; it appears that most distance learning centres have not been able to fully embrace the e-learning platform for the teaching of English Language courses. Various factors might be responsible for these such as student population, training of lecturers and students, sustainable internet facilities amongst others. To ascertain the challenges of e-learning and t h e way forwards, this paper examines the e-learning challenges and implementation

strategies for language teaching in distance learning centres in the COVID-19 era.

The objectives of this paper are therefore to:

a) Identify The Challenges Of E-Learning Implementation For Teaching English Language Courses In Distance Learning Centres In The COVID-19 Era.

b) Discuss Possible Strategies Needed For Proper E-Learning Implementation For English Language Courses In Distance Learning Centres In The COVID-19 Era.

c) Make Suggestions Based On The Review

To achieve the above objective, the rest of this paper is divided into four sections. The first part discusses the Basic Concepts, part two discusses the challenges of e-learning implementation for English language courses in distance learning centres in the COVID-19 era,part three addresses the strategies needed for proper e-learning implementation for English language courses in distance learning centres in the COVID-19 era while part four contains the conclusion and recommendations.

II. BASIC CONCEPTS

The basic concepts considered germane in this paper include: E-learning, English Language, Open and Distance Learning (ODL), COVID -19 era. A brief conceptual review has beenprovided on them for clarification

E-learning: Electronic learning (e-Learning) is an electronic delivery and administration of learning opportunities and support via computer networks and web-based technology (Adu, Eze, Salako, &Nyangechi, 2013). It covers a wide range of systems, from students using e-mail to accessing coursework online. E-Learning can be of different types: Web supplemented, Web-dependent, and mixed-mode (OECD, 2005). Application and processes of e-Learning include web-based learning, computer-based learning, virtual classroom, video conferencing, and digital collaboration where contents are delivered via the internet, intranet/extranet, audio/videotape, satellite TV, CD-Rom. eLearning creates a self-centered approach to learning by relaxing time and space, enriches learning content, and enhances wider access to information resources.

Parks (2013) suggested that "e-" should refer to "everything, everyone, engaging and easy" in addition to „electronic". Developments in internet and multimedia technologies are the basic enablers of e-learning, with consulting, content, technologies, services, and support being identified as the five key sectors of the e-learning industry (European Commission, 2000). Regardless of the educational level or stage e-learning can be adopted, used, or applied in the education for effective teaching and learning. E-learning is a learner-controlled, self-paced education environment where the learner has authority over the learning environment; thereby allowing learners to work at their pace, convenience (Eke, 2011).

The devices that are used for e-learning purposes include personal computers, CD ROMs, television, personal digital assistants (PDAs), MP3 players, and mobile phones. Communication technology enables the use of the Internet, e-mail, discussion forums, collaborative software, classroom management software, team learning systems, intranet,

extranet, Local Area Network (LAN), Wide Area Network (WAN), audio and videotape, satellite and interactive television lectures, satellite-delivered learning, virtual educational networks, satellite downlinks computerized diagnostic assessment, competency certification, and electronic portfolios among others. The changes in education have led to a paradigm shift from teacher-centredness through to learner-centredness (Kasse&Balunywa, 2013). The extent to which e-learning assists or replaces other learning and teaching approaches is varied ranging on a continuum from none to fully online distance learning (Bates and Poole, 2013; Balunywa, 2013).

English Language: English Language is a compulsory subject taken at the secondary school level to qualify students to enter the universities in Nigeria. It is one of the most important world languages. It cuts across political and ideological lines because of its conveniences as a lingua Franca. It is regarded as a key, which opens doors to scientific and technical knowledge, and it is indispensable to the economic and political development of the vast areas of the world.

English Language gradually became an international language through the act of colonization of the British in an attempt to explore the whole world (Olatunji, 2017). As a result of this, English language has gradually become a major language of instruction by all and sundry. It is a medium of communication for the rich and the poor, the affluence and down-trodden in our society (Okueso, Osikomaiya, Osijo, Omotayo, &Arowolo 2018). English language among other languages has been recognized as a core and compulsory subject at the Basic and Post-Basic Education levels. Okueso, *et al.*, (2018) added that the government recognizes the importance of English Language for enhancing educational attainment as well for improving communicative competence and ability of citizens. Hence, English language continues to be a medium of instruction for all subjects from primary level to tertiary level in so many countries including Nigeria.

Open and Distance Learning (ODL): The terms „open learning" and „distance learning" according to Onwe (2015) represent approaches that focus on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from the constraints of time and place, and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and group of learners. Hence, Open and distance learning centres are institutions or study campuses where open and distance learning education takes place. Some of the more commonly used terms related to Open and Distance Learning (ODL) include the following: correspondence education, home study, independent study, external studies, continuing education, distance teaching, self-instruction, adult education, technology-based or mediated education, learner-centred education, open learning, open access, flexible learning, and distributed learning.

In the National Policy on Education, the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2013), described ODL as life-long learning, life-wide education, adult education, media-based education, self-learning. Several founding fathers of distance learning had earlier come up with different definitions. For instance, Besong (2014) defined distance learning as a method of imparting knowledge, skills, and attitudes, which are rationalized by the application of division of labour and organizational principles as well as by the extensive use of technical media, especially, to reproduce high-quality teaching material which makes it possible to, instruct great numbers of students in the same time wherever they live. It is simply an industrialized form of teaching and learning.

Onwe (2015) described open and distance learning as a systematically organized form of self-study in which students'" counseling, presentation of learning materials and securing and supervising of students'' success is carried out by a team of teachers each of whom has responsibilities. In its broad sense, Farrell (2014) contends that open distance learning embraces open learning, distance education, flexible learning, online learning, e-learning, and virtual education. According to him, open learning practices allow entry learning with no or minimum barriers in respect of gender, age, etc. Distance learning, on the other hand, deals with training or teaching people who are separated by time and space from their teachers utilizing certain mediating processes to transmit learning content. Flexible learning involves providing learning opportunities that can be accessed at any time and place with much emphasis on the scheduling of activities than to any specific mode of delivery. Online and e-learning are terms used to describe applications of ICTs to boost distance learning, implement open learning policies among others while virtual learning combines both online and e-learning but it is web-centric and not limitedto learners outside conventional learning setting (Besong, 2014).

COVID -19 era: The Coronavirus infection (COVID-19) era describes the period of emergence of the novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV, officially known as SARS-CoV-2 or COVID-19). The infectious illness which broke out during the winter of 2019 was first reported in December 2019, as a cluster of acute respiratory illness in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China, from where it spread rapidly to over 198 countries (Obaseki, Akoria &Ogboghodo, 2020). It was declared as a global pandemic by WHO on 12th March 2020. The outbreak of coronavirus in Iran was officially confirmed to be in Qom on February 19, 2020. However, previously suspected cases of coronavirus have been reported in Iran. As of the 26th of March 2020, over half a million cases of COVID have been reported with a death toll of over 23,000 patients. Among the top-ranking countries, Iran was reported to be in the sixth position with over 29,000 confirmed cases and over 2,200 deaths (Owhonda, Maduka&Nwadiuto, 2020).

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is viral pneumonia with symptoms such as dry cough, fever, sore throat, dyspnea, body pain, and diarrhea. This disease emerged in late

December 2019 in Wuhan, in Hubei province of China, and within three months, it had spread globally, prompting the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare COVID-19 a threat to world health. SARS-CoV-2 belongs to the family Coronaviridae (of the order Nidovirales, large, positive single-stranded RNA viruses), which are important human and animal viruses, in permanent circulation with four members of this family causing respiratory infections (common cold) worldwide (Erfani, Shahriarirad, Ranjbar, Mirahmadizadeh&Moghadami, 2020).

COVID-19 is caused by a previously unreported strain of coronavirus, officially named Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). It primarily spreads from person to person through close contact and contaminated surfaces, often via small droplets produced by the infected person through coughing, sneezing, or talking (CDC, 2020a; WHO, 2020c). COVID-19 is most contagious immediately after the onset of symptoms, although the spread through asymptomatic cases has been reported. The incubation period is around 5 days (range, 2–14 days), and common symptoms include fever, cough, and shortness of breath (CDC, 2020b, 2020c; Kashid, Shidhore, Kazi & Patil, 2020).

III. BARRIERS OF E-LEARNING FOR TEACHING ENGLISH LANGUAGE COURSES IN ODL CENTRES IN THE COVID-19 ERA

E-learning implementation is arguably a means of reducing the challenge of capacity, equity, and access to education, and an opportunity to educate and the train has a growing and undeniably enormous demand in the above-named fields. However, some barriers such as inadequate human capacity, inadequate funding, lack of e-learning infrastructure, ICT and bandwidth constraints, poor electricity supply, and institutional governance; constrain the adoption and integration of e-learning for teaching English language courses in ODL centres in the COVID-19 era. Some of these e-learning barriers include:

Inadequate Human Capacity: Apart from insufficient trained manpower for the development, maintenance, and operation, in the context of e-learning integration in ODLs (Aduke, 2017) stressed that limited or non-availability of e-learning trained teaching staff militates against capacity building in ODL centres in Nigeria. Consequently, e-learning has not been fully integrated into the teaching and learning of most language-related courses like English Language in the COVID-19 era (Aina, 2020). Even ODL centres with relatively good e-learning infrastructure are still at a low level of e-learning integration into teaching, learning, research, library, information, and managerial services due to inadequately skilled hands (Sharma, Ekundayo & Ng, 2019). Apart from lucrative job opportunities available to e-learning professionals outside academics, the cost of training in e-learning is so high that after being trained, no academic client/employer offers commensurate financial reward for the value-added. This leads to a withdrawal of such expertise and whatever is not frequently used is soon forgotten.

Inadequate Funding: This is a major challenge confronting the acquisition and utilization of e-learning in ODL centres in Nigeria. Economic factors ranging from the lack of capacity to pay for costly infrastructure to sustaining computer networks introduced through donor funding weighed on the ODL centres as their budgets continued to get slashed (Aina, 2020). Since no defined sustainable business framework has yet emerged for adequate provision of e-learning facilities for teaching and learning courses including language-related courses like English Language; most ODL centres are not willing to invest the little fund available to the extent their e-learning infrastructure for the teaching and learning of English and other language- related courses in the COVID-19 era (Park, 2013; Sharma, Ekundayo& Ng, 2019).

Lack of e-learning infrastructure: Limited or lack of connectivity in many developing countries including Nigeria Universities impedes access to online learning e.g. (E-learning) and thereby affects the teaching and learning of English language courses in ODL centres. Furthermore, the cost of accessing the internet in Nigeria is still on the high side. Hence, some students find it a challenge to afford (Kasse&Blunywa, 2013). Despite increasing evidence that investing in e-learning is cost-effective, the total cost of e-learning infrastructure maintenance and upgrade has remained high for ODL centres (Adam 2003). E-learning infrastructure costs often include that of computers and peripherals, stable internet service connections, multimedia projectors video equipment, specialized tools like digital microscopes, electrical wiring, internet access, lighting, air-conditioning, space, network equipment, and other supplies. However, the challenge is that some of the infrastructure needed to support teaching, learning, and research is lacking; making supplies of these infrastructures depressingly low in ODL centres and this has made e-learning implementation difficult in the COVID-19 era.

ICT and Bandwidth Constraints: Nigeria, like most developing nations, faces capacity constraints largely as a result of thin bandwidth (Ekundayo, 2009). Bandwidth is the scarcest ICT resource in open and distance learning (ODL) centres and this is mainly due to high licensing fees for connecting to advanced circuits for obtaining authorization (Adam 2003). The survey by Ekundayo (2009) showed that almost 60% of African countries have a bandwidth that is less than that of a typical institution in the developed world and added that only six countries in Africa has a reasonable outgoing bandwidth. Nigeria is not an exception in this subject. Internet connectivity is usually available in most tertiary institutions (open and distance learning centres inclusive) in Nigeria, but in most cases, the bandwidth subscribed to (which determines the speed of access) is too

small to support any meaningful academic activity during peak periods. Also, some ODLs have Compact Disc Read-Only Memory (CD-ROM) collections on specialized fields or disciplines such as English Language; but the quality of the information on the CDs cannot be guaranteed as no effort is made to update them. This thereby makes the teaching and learning of English language courses challenging using e-learning platforms in the COVID-19 era.

Poor electricity supply: Nigeria faces epileptic generation and supply of electricity and e-learning requires equipment that can facilitate learning, but in some of the ODL centres in Nigeria, the equipment such as computers, digital technology, and internet are not available for proper utilization (Ajadi, Salawu & Adeoye, 2018). Also, the irregular and frequent power supply interruption in Nigeria is a perennial problem affecting almost every aspect of the economy, including education. Aduke (2017) argued that it has been a major setback for technological advancement in the teaching and learning of English Language courses in ODL centres effectively. Most rural areas in Nigeria are not even connected to the national grid. The consequence of this is that ODLs sited within such areas may find it difficult to use e-learning facilities for teaching English Language courses effectively in the COVID-19 era. Recently, the Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN), the body responsible for electricity in the country, was privatized in the hope to address this national problem. Furthermore, it does not all allow for flexibility in the way classes are run. In some states such as Lagos, Abuja, and Port-Harcourt where classes in ODL centres run at various times of the day to cater for the large student population; most classes only run during the day due to power shortage (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2016).

Institutional Governance: Some ODLs suffer poor, inefficient, and highly bureaucratic management systems. Poorly trained, poorly qualified personnel; inefficient, ineffective, and out-of-date management and administrative infrastructure; and poorly remunerated staff are the norms. This is the reason why most of the Art and Language related Departments still have aging and obsolete equipment. The Ministry of Education and other regulatory bodies that oversee the activities of ODL are staffed almost entirely by long-serving public servants that appear to operate in relative isolation from international higher education bodies and likewise appear to lack adequate knowledge of how modern ODL centers should function (Guragain, 2016).

IV. STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING E-LEARNING INTEGRATION

Strategies that can be adopted for e-learning integration in the teaching of English Language courses in ODL centres in the COVID-19 era include: Some of them have been discussed below

Integration of Open Sources into e-learning: Develop and adopt strategies for implementing open and source software.

There are very good open-source programmes available for most applications in education and training. Open source not only offers major cost savings but can also provide higher quality and reliability. Of course, institutions cannot change overnight. Firstly, when new software is required, open-source applications should be considered first. Secondly, ODL centres should develop strategies to migrate from proprietary to open-source software. Larger ODL centres may consider forming partnerships with the many open-source companies providing support and consultancy services (Agah, Ogbeche & Okorie, 2016)

Establishment of Data Collection Repositories: ODL centres in Nigeria should consider establishing their materials repository or a distributed repository across the study centres. Smaller schools may consider the technology too advanced and demanding of resources and should consider partnerships and networks to contribute to a shared repository. In all cases, it is important that as far as possible, repositories are open and do not impose proprietary standards.

Encouragement of Resource Sharing among staff: Teachers and facilitators in ODL centres have the skills to produce learning resources and materials. What is commonly lacking is a culture of sharing those materials. This requires an institutional culture change and a redefinition of profiles (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2016). The creation of materials should become an accepted part of facilitators' and trainers" everyday work. This does not mean merely adding an extra burden of work, and institutions should review their policies to include materials" development as a part of the everyday activities of their staff. At the same time, facilitators in ODL centres should be encouraged to share materials through institutional and shared repositories for effective teaching of English language courses in the COVID-19 era. In addition, there are many free resources available on the Web, and collections and repositories of free learning resources are growing fast. The biggest barrier to using these free materials may be the lack of awareness of teachers that they exist and the lack of skills and knowledge on how to search for free materials. Searching for and using free materials should be an integral part of any training for teachers and trainers in e-learning.

Development of Partnerships and Networks: ODL centres in Nigeria should actively seek to develop partnerships and networks for e-learning. These partnerships and networks may take many different forms, depending on the need to include the sharing of resources and resources development and the delivery of English language courses and programmes. The effective use of collaboration and groupware can enhance the operation of such partnerships in this COVID-19 era where physical distancing between facilitators and learners is largely encouraged. Also, ODL centres should consider forming partnerships with software companies and materials developers which go beyond

customers"'/suppliers"' relationships to iteratively and actively co-develop e-learning applications (Aduke, 2017).

Integration of ICT with the Whole Curriculum: Curriculum planners should adopt a whole-curriculum approach to e-learning. Rather than see e-learning as a separate activity, appropriate only to individual targets groups or courses, they should look at how e-learning can be used to enhance present learning provision across all courses including English language and related language disciplines. This does not mean that all courses should be delivered through e-learning. It means that there should be different e-learning applications and features which could be integrated into the ODL e-learning platform as a part of e-learning and teaching strategy for example access to learning support tools for students with special needs, the use of educative language games, or the provision of language learning tests for students following traditional learning programmes (Guragain, 2016).

Evaluation of E-learning practices: E-learning involves the use of digital tools for teaching and learning. It makes use of technological tools to enable learners to study at any time and anywhere. It involves the training and delivery of knowledge and enhances students' interactions with each other as well as exchange ideas and points of view. It enhances communication and improves the relationships that sustain learning Arkorful &Abaidoo (2014). However, Nigeria is still at a stage of experimentation in e-learning. ODL centres in Nigeria must know what works and what does not. This means developing a rigorous strategy which not only focuses on the technology but on learning despite the outbreak of the COVID-19. Formative evaluation should be an integral part of all plans and projects for teaching with e-learning with the results of the evaluation informing further development and the review of strategic plans and future directions (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2016)

V. CONCLUSION

Inadequate human capacity, inadequate funding, lack of e-learning infrastructure, ICT and bandwidth constraints, poor electricity supply, and institutional governance; are some of the constraints of e-learning adoption and integration for the teaching English language courses in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) centres in the COVID-19 era. To resolve these challenges it is suggested that:

- Open Distance Learning (ODL) centres need to be properly funded through the provision of adequate computer labs, computers and all the necessary software by the government to promote the use of computer-assisted learning (CAL) and e-learning systems for teaching English Language courses in distance learning centres.

- Free and stable internet services should be provided in all ODL centres by the government. This would encourage the use of e-learning facilities among facilitators and students on English language-related programmes for knowledge sharing and information dissemination on English language courses.

- A maintenance unit needs to be provided in all ODL centres to ensure that any defective e-learning systems for teaching and learning of English language courses in ODL centresin the COVID-19 era.

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