

TEACHING ENGLISH IN THE DIGITAL AGE: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

This paper examines the challenges and prospects of teaching English Language through e-learning in Nigerian tertiary institutions. E-learning, a product of information and communication technology (ICT), has significantly influenced human life since its emergence in the early 1990s. Online learning, particularly through digital resources, has the potential to engage even the most passive learners. Moreover, e-learning provides a supportive environment for effective English Language teaching and learning. The paper highlights the need for integrating e-learning into English Language education in Nigeria and recommends the provision of computer literacy training programs for English language teachers, as well as adequate ICT facilities in tertiary institutions, to ensure the effective implementation and sustainability of e-learning in English Language instruction.

Keywords: *E-learning, Teaching, English Language, Information and Communication Technology (ICT)*

Introduction

E-learning has been variously defined by several authors and educationists. Hedge and Hayward (2004) define it thus; “e-learning is an innovative approach for delivering electronically mediated, well designed, learner centered and interactive learning environment to anyone, at any place, any time by utilizing the internet and digital technologies in concert with institutional design principles”. E-learning to Rosenberg (2001) is “the use of internet technologies to deliver a broad array of solutions that enhance knowledge and performance”. He sees e-learning as being based on three fundamental principles or criteria namely; that elearning is networked, which makes it capable of instant updating storage/retrieval, distribution and sharing of instruction or information, its content delivery to the end-user is via a computer using standard internet technology, and it focuses on the broadcast view of paradigms of training. E-learning, therefore can be seen as the latest form of distance learning mediated by state of the art technologies like the Internet and World Wide Web (www). Moreover, the development of information and communication technology (ICT) has greatly minimized the use of traditional means of teaching and learning known as face to face (F2F) method, where the teacher and the learner are physically present in the classroom environment, by implementing either a blended/mixed learning or totally change it into full time online learning (e-learning).

Hence, the rapid development in ICT has greatly changed and influenced strategies and concepts of teaching and learning in the modern world. Martimore (1999) and Tomei (2003) state that e-learning is

much more than online training or computer-based training (CBT) as it encompasses knowledge management, electronic performance support and computer conference enabling group communication made possible by the Internet and World Wide Web (www) as one of the key characteristics of e-learning which makes it qualitatively more superior to the conventional distance learning method. In addition, the Economic Times of India defines e-learning as “a learning system based on formalized teaching but with the help of electronic resources”. E-learning can also be termed as a network enabled transfer of skills and knowledge and the delivery of education made to a large number of recipients at the same or different times.

In Nigeria, so many institutions of higher learning, secondary and primary schools have adopted the use of e-learning as an alternative means of teaching and learning. This was reinforced and made evident during the Covid-19 Pandemic period (March-September, 2020) but it has been observed that the implementation of this technology based learning system is prevalent mostly in privately owned schools where the parents of students are usually the wealthy and well-to-do in the society. This is so because it is only this exclusive group of people that can afford the high cost of computers and data subscription with which their wards surf the Internet and link up with online classes. However, Rodinadze & Zarazoa (2012) are of the opinion that ICT opens the doors for better distance learning programs, allowing those in disadvantaged areas to have access to the same education as the privileged. E-learning makes information accessible from nearly any location, any time with a mobile device or laptop computer. In addition to the above, e-learning makes courses student take to be more flexible, meaning that learners with full schedules who may not have the time or opportunity to further their education can choose to enroll in programmes or courses online. This invariably attests to the fact that e-learning has widened access to education in different countries of the world including Nigeria.

The definition of the concept of e-learning will be incomplete without that of Saluwadeen (2006) who defined e-learning as the convergence of the Internet and learning or Internet-enabled learning. It is the delivery of individualized, comprehensive, dynamic learning content in real time, aiding the development of communities of knowledge, linking learners and practitioners with experts. It is obvious from the foregoing that the world has moved at an unprecedented speed in the area of access to information and its dissemination. Hence, the need to meet up the challenges of modern learning strategies in the teaching of English language through e-learning.

Presently in Nigeria, one of the most popular supports for e-learning is the Learning Management System (LMS) which is the highest form of e-learning. LMS is a special software which provides multipurpose support for teaching and learning. The system contains a set of tools for creating, administering and distributing of e-learning courses or subjects and also the tools for communication makes it different from web-based training where testing, evaluation and feedback are not possible.

Types of E-Learning Platforms

There are different ways of classifying the types of e-learning. Some educational scientists simply identify two primary types' namely computer-based e-learning and Internet based elearning.

Algahtani (2011) describes computer-based learning as one which comprises the use of a full range of hardware and software generally that are available for the use of Information and Communication Technology and could be used for either computer-managed instruction or computer-assisted learning. In Computer-Assisted Learning (CAL) or Computer-Assisted Instruction (CAI), computers are used together with traditional teaching by providing interactive software as a support tool within the class or for self-learning outside the class. This computer-assisted training methods use a combination of multimedia such as text, graphics, sound and video in order to enhance learning. The primary value of CAI is interactivity as it allows students to become active learners instead of passive learners, by utilizing various methods such as quizzes and other computer-assisted teaching and testing mechanisms. On the other hand, Computer-Managed Learning (CML) or Computer-Managed Instruction (CMI) is used by educational institutions for storing and retrieving information which aids in educational management like lecture information, training materials, grades, curriculum information, enrolment information and so on. Here, computers are used to manage and assess learning processes. These learning systems operate through information databases which contain bits of information which the student has to learn together with a number of ranking parameters. This enables the system to be individualized according to the preferences of each student. If the student's learning outcome is not satisfactory at the end of the learning exercise, the process can be repeated until the student has achieved their desired learning goals.

Moreover, Internet-based learning according to Almosa (2002) is a further improvement of the computer-based learning which makes educational content available on the Internet. The knowledge sources like e-mail services and references on the internet could be used by learners at any time and place even when teachers and instructors are available or absent. Zeitoun (2008) classified Internet-based learning by the extent of such features used in education; mixed or blended mode, assistant mode, and completely online mode. According to him, the assistant mode supplements the traditional method as needed, the mixed or blended mode offers a short-term degree for a partly traditional method and the completely online mode involves the exclusive use of the Internet (network) for learning activities. Internet-based learning allows students to learn at their own pace, access the information at a time that is convenient for them, and provides education to remote students that otherwise would not be able to travel to a classroom.

Another classification of e-learning is based on the timing of instruction; namely synchronous e-learning and asynchronous e-learning. Synchronous e-learning also known as real-time learning involves the teachers and the learners being online and also interacting at the same time from different locations with the use of tools such as video conferencing (zoom) and online chats. This type of e-learning according to Almosa (2002) offers the advantage of instantaneous feedback. Also, the participants can share their ideas and opinions during the lecture. This is currently one of the most popular and quickest growing types of

e-learning. Asynchronous e-learning, on the other hand, involves students studying independently at different times and locations from each other, without real-time communication taking place. It is pause-and-resume kind of learning and the learner and teacher cannot be online at the same time. In asynchronous e-learning, participants can post communications to any other participant over the Internet through thread discussions and e-mails after the learning has taken place. Another advantage is that this type of e-learning method is considered to be more students-centered than the synchronous counterpart as they give students more flexibility. Students who do not have flexible schedules prefer it because it allows them to utilize self-paced learning as they can set their own time frames for learning and are not required to learn at specific time intervals together with other students.

Teaching of English Language through E-Learning in Nigeria

In Nigeria today, English is not only the medium of instruction in primary, secondary schools and institutions of higher learning (Colleges of Education, Monotechnics/Polytechnics and Universities), but it has also become a common Lingua Franca. This is because Nigeria is a highly multi-lingual and multicultural society made up of people who come from diverse linguistic backgrounds with over four hundred and fifty (450) ethnic groups and languages. In a typical school classroom, the students are usually from diverse ethnic groups and have different languages. Hence, the adoption of a common language as a medium of teaching the various subjects offered in the school. This language of popular choice is the English language.

Teaching English Language through e-learning is a fairly new innovation in the country as the traditional method of Face-to-Face has been the only way of teaching where both the teacher and the learners (students) are physically present in a physical classroom setting. Online resources for the learning of English are replete in the Internet with the availability of online dictionaries, encyclopedia and various e-textbooks in different aspects of English language like syntax, phonetics/phonology, morphology, English varieties and English composition. These aid the students in their independent study. Also, there are various English Language websites for students who intend to expand their knowledge and improve their competence in the study and use of English.

However, it should be noted that e-learning in teaching English Language in Nigeria is at its infancy stage. Organizations like the British Council help teachers and students in their bid to attain an appreciable level of competence in online English Language teaching and learning.

Challenges of Teaching English Language through E-Learning

There is no doubt that proper implementation of e-learning in education improves the efficiency of the educational process by making learning easily accessible. In spite of this benefit, studies carried out by researchers indicate some of the challenges of e-learning faced by teachers in using ICT in Nigeria particularly.

- **Inadequate access to technology:** Internet access in Nigeria is not steady and readily available. There is always network problem in most parts of the country. Internet services are not available in some rural areas and this makes it impossible for teachers to embrace e-learning.
- **Inadequate and epileptic power supply:** Electricity supply in Nigeria is grossly inadequate and is one of the major problems facing the country. The electricity supply is not stable. Even the English language teachers in the cities and towns are faced with the problem of epileptic power supply as electricity supply is not constant and reliable. Electronic equipment like computer, television set, radio, etc. are always damaged due to poor supply of electricity. All these problems combine to hinder the effective use of e-learning in teaching English language course in schools. Kadiri (2008) opined that it is difficult to keep high technology equipment such as the computer when electricity supply is not constant and stable.
- **High cost of installation of ICT:** In Nigeria, poverty level is relatively high and most lecturers (English language teachers inclusive) cannot still acquire their personal computers which is very expensive and above the reach of the average Nigerian. Even the few teachers who have their computers cannot connect to the Internet because of data subscription charges which are very high. Most of the time, lecturers and students make use of computer cybercafé for their online studies. Obanya (2002) observed that prices of computer hardware and software continue to drop in most developed countries, but in developing countries such as Nigeria, computers are still very expensive. However, Singh (2016) states that there is need for adequate availability of technology in schools which includes huge costs incurred on acquiring installing, operating, maintaining and replacing ICTs.
- **Lack of ICT skills:** Most English language teachers lack sufficient knowledge of computer and its usage in the teaching process. They are not ICT literate and cannot handle effectively ICT tools for teaching and learning English language. According to Barret (2007) teachers need effective tools, techniques and assistance that can help them develop computer-based projects and activities especially designed to raise the level of teaching in required subjects and improve students' learning.
- **Maintenance and technical support:** Lack of maintenance and technical support is a problem in ICT as there is the likelihood that the computer system may break down during lesson. Most of the time, there are very few technical staff who can handle such emergency repairs when it occurs. Even when English language lecturers and few students have their personal computers, when a technical problem occurs, repairs and maintenance is not easy and reachable.
- **Resistance to change:** Most English Language lecturers and students are not ready to embrace e-learning in teaching and learning the subject as there are no additional benefits attached to it. Also, most of them are not computer literate and would prefer to continue with their traditional chalk and board method of teaching. In addition, Ajadi, Salawu and Adeoye (2008) are of the opinion that since ICT encourages independent learning, most students are reluctant to take responsibility for their own learning but prefer to be spoon-fed at all times.

- Remoteness or lack of interaction: Students generally see e-learning as uninteresting and boring because learners are not able to interact or relate with their teachers when they do not understand any aspect of the lesson. This is because e-learning as a method of education makes the learner undergo contemplation, remoteness, as well as lack of interaction or relation. It therefore requires a very strong inspiration as well as skills in order to reduce such effects on the learners. E-learning is seen as less effective in respect to clarifications, offer of explanations and interpretations which can easily be accessed in traditional face-to-face teaching method.

Prospects of Teaching English Language through E-Learning

E-learning despite its overwhelming disadvantages in its effective use in developing countries like Nigeria has a lot of advantages that may lead to its eventual success and full adoption in teaching various subjects in schools especially in institutions of higher learning.

The teaching of English Language through e-learning, like in any other course, will require proper planning and designing of e-language material. Also the delivery and usage of these materials should be systematic depending on the e-learning tool used.

E-learning media include audio/video cassettes, CDs/DVDs, radio and television broadcasts, computers and the internet (Tinio, 2003). Although the design of e-learning material will vary in relation to the e-learning medium used, a general approach is used as follows;

Step I: Planning E-Learning Material

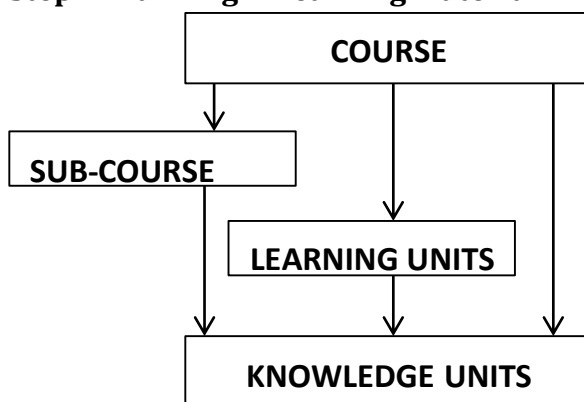


Figure 1: Altenhofen & Schaper's Content Aggregation Model

For effective planning of e-learning material the course content should be broken down into bits. A content aggregation model was developed by Altenhofen & Schaper (2002) in which the course content is divided into four distinct structural levels namely:

- Knowledge items
- Learning units
- Sub courses
- Course

The above model helps in the planning of course content for e-learning purposes into levels that will be designed appropriately to suit the e-learning medium intended to be used.

Step II: Designing E-Learning Material

Designing the e-learning material should be done with utmost care because it will determine the efficiency of the material in achieving its instructional objectives when it is used. The e-learning material should be logical and systematic following the model above. The items in the material should be properly linked together to form a cohesive whole. The e-learning material especially the visual ones should include the following; ☐ Animated graphics.

- Clear text: The text format should be attractive and should suit the idea intended to be passed.
- Easy navigations: It should be easy for the users of the e-material to move from one page, slide or screen (as the case may be) to another.
- Games: Existing educational games should be included to help retain students' motivation where necessary.
- The audio should be clear and easily understandable.
- Related videos of each topic or lesson should be included.

Apart from planning and designing the e-learning material, the teacher should deliver the materials to the students at the appropriate time. Not too many e-learning materials should be given at once in order to ensure students understand what is expected from them in the use of these materials. It is the teacher's duty to organize these materials to suit the objectives of the course.

Conclusion

The study examined the challenges and prospects of teaching English Language through e-learning in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The study discovered that e-learning involves the use of digital tools for teaching and learning. Also, e-learning has come to be a more effective method of imparting knowledge to students. The method is flexible in terms of place and time for the delivery of lectures. Despite the challenges discussed, the literatures have sought to explain the role of e-learning and how e-learning has made a strong impact in the teaching and learning process. I strongly believe that if e-learning is properly implemented and encouraged in various institutions in Nigeria, it will go a long way to improve effective and efficient learning not only in English language but also in other subjects (courses) in the school curriculum.

Recommendations

Based on the challenges identified in this study as hindering effective teaching and learning of English Language through e-learning in Nigeria, the following recommendations are proffered.

First, the government authorities and school management in particular should provide adequate e-learning facilities in institutions of higher learning. Nwokolo and Anyachebelu (2012) assert that the level of e-learning facilities would be improved if quality Internet facilities are provided and accessible. However, the school management and government should brace up to those challenges through

acquisition and installation of modern e-learning infrastructures and instruct active involvement of e-learning in all school curricula.

Secondly, there should be constant electricity supply in the institutions to enhance students' and lecturers' access to e-learning activities.

Finally, periodical computer training should be organized for lecturers. This will enable them acquire relevant skills and knowledge on the usage of e-learning facilities (Evoh, 2007). ELearning facilities should be upgraded from time to time in order to improve lecturers' performance.

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