3 Online remote language teaching during and beyond the pandemic: echoes from the Anchor University in Lagos

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Abstract

The outbreak of the coronavirus (COVID-19) brought along with it a number of socio-political, public health, administrative, economic, and educational challenges and impacts across the world. Teaching and learning as a critical component of our social existence have been equally impacted with new technologies providing both the tools and affordances for effective virtual learning. This chapter discusses the adoption and application of digital technologies for online teaching and learning at Anchor University, Lagos (AUL), a private tertiary institution in Lagos, Nigeria. The study foregrounds its theoretical principles on Kirkwood and Price's (2014) perspective on Technology-Enhanced Learning (TEL) and Herring's (2004) Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA). The dataset was drawn from Google Classroom's platform deployed by AUL during the COVID-19 crisis. I used qualitative content-based analysis to discuss how the selected data reflect the reality of TEL during the pandemic. The study argues that the deployment of new technologies for teaching and learning in higher education utilised the existing framework and availability of digital tools and mobile communication networks resulting from the phenomenal development of the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) industry in Nigeria. It confirms that the availability of a range of digital technologies and social media platforms has improved the possibilities of adapting to remote

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learning during the period and beyond. It concludes by highlighting socio-educational benefits of remote teaching and learning and some challenges of teaching language-related courses in Nigeria and other similar cultural contexts.

Keywords: COVID-19, online language teaching, virtual learning environment, Nigeria.

1. Introduction and the context of the study

The outbreak of the pandemic has accelerated the development of life-changing technologies that now enable the modern world to accomplish tremendous things thought near-impossible several years ago. The deployment of these new technologies and the emergence of 'new normal phenomena' have succeeded in reconfiguring the motions, mechanics, and dynamics of our daily lives. While teaching online has been increasingly popular in western institutions as far back as the early 1990's when computers and the internet were becoming widespread, the COVID-19 crisis has accelerated its spread and growth across the world.

In this part of the world, the transition from classroom-based to remote teaching and learning represents a paradigm shift for many educational institutions in Nigeria. Prior to the COVID-19 era in March 2020, some efforts had been made to create viable online learning environments through different learning management systems, especially the popular massive open online courses. However, while online distance learning has become popular with the establishment of the National Open University Nigeria to compete with other conventional universities offering online courses, the COVID-19 public health crisis accelerated the pace of remote teaching and learning in Nigeria. The emergence of more recent software/platforms such as Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Skype, Telegram, and WhatsApp accelerated the development of online learning during the pandemic.

Historically, the growth of the mobile communication system and internet services in Nigeria at the turn of the century has contributed widely to the acceleration of the digitalisation initiatives that began around the late 1990's. At the tertiary education level around the country, aggressive digitalisation and automation of administrative and aspects of academic activities began in the early 2000's. Most institutions of higher learning realised the urgency to move their administrative processes such as processing of admission documents, students' registration, examination results, and procurement of academic transcripts, etc.

On March 30th, 2020, the federal government of Nigeria announced total lockdown in some major cities following the spread of the pandemic. Consequently, schools were shut and students were forced to stay at home. Some state governments utilised traditional media platforms such as radio and television to deliver instructions on different subjects to pupils and students in public schools. Proprietors and owners of private secondary schools relied on new media technologies and digital platforms because the student populations are usually drawn from children from the upper and middle classes with stronger economic power. Such students in these categories constitute about 37.5% of the total population of students (Oyediran et al., 2020; NESG, 2020). Since their parents can afford to give their wards smartphones, laptops, or other devices with internet connectivity, it was not difficult for such private schools to switch to remote teaching. Some popular platforms deployed by some secondary schools include WhatsApp, Telegram, Skype, Jitsu, and Facebook. The use of mobile devices to teach and receive educational content suddenly became fashionable in urban areas like Lagos, Abuja, Port-Harcourt, and Kaduna where the lockdown was more pronounced. Private companies offering online lessons, applications, and tutorials also grew.

At the post-secondary educational level, most private and faith-based universities relied on web-based platforms with technical affordances for text-based and audio-visual interactions that also allowed synchronous, real-time communication such as Zoom, Google Meet, or Google Classroom, for remote teaching and learning. Despite challenges that included high cost of internet data, epileptic power supply that have been part of the daily experience of Nigerians before the public health crisis, COVID-19 provided an entirely new experience and paradigm shift in

online teaching and education management services in Nigeria. It is observed however that most public universities were confronted with challenges such as lack of teaching facilities in digital format, widespread lack of experience in remote teaching among academic staff, and the lingering strike action by university teachers. On the other hand, many private universities with existing robust digital infrastructure and technologies were able to move swiftly from face-to-face, in-person teaching to virtual teaching.

Since March 2020 therefore, remote teaching has increasingly become very fashionable and moving to the level of defining the future of higher education in Nigeria. It is this new trend that constitutes the focus of this study on how new technologies are promoting virtual learning, against the backdrop of the pandemic, using a private university as a case study.

2. Technology, remote teaching, and online interaction

Kirkwood and Price's (2014, p. 1) description of remote teaching and learning as TEL focuses on the application of ICT to teaching and learning. As technologies are being used in other sectors of human activities to improve the mechanics and dynamics of our daily life, it is assumed that technologies have the potential to enhance learning. It is true that some challenges may impede this new mode of teaching such as the cost of financial investment made by institutions for infrastructure, equipment, and technical support staff, personal investment made by staff and students in using the technology for teaching and learning which will include the cost of alternative power supply, personal internet services/data, and laptop, desktop or smartphones. TEL however has been found to offer some benefits to learners and instructors especially during public health crises such as COVID-19.

Gillet-Swan (2017) asserts that the prevailing assumption is that "technological incorporation, learning enhancement, and student engagement are mutually and inextricably linked" (p. 21). However, Orlando and Attard (2015) argue that

"teaching with technology is not a one size fits all approach as it depends on the types of technology in use at the time and also the curriculum content being taught" (p. 119). The availability of different technologies has made this argument plausible. Herring (2001) considers how synchronous and asynchronous models of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) influence online discourse behaviour. As mentioned elsewhere (Opeibi & Oluwasola, 2013),

> "CMC has been used as tool kits to study and explain how the new media technologies influence the strategies in which language users within a given virtual sphere engage a wide range of audience through the virtual protocols (Herring, 2001)" (p. 123).

Herring's (2004) CMDA argues that online interaction overwhelmingly takes place by means of discourse (p. 1). One of the assumptions of CMDA germane to this study is encapsulated in the view that these new technologies may shape the process and pattern of online communication in virtual learning environments especially as they promote both asynchronous and synchronous communication with its socio-technical features.

3. Methodology

As part of the data collection procedures adopted for the study, I used datasets extracted from the Google Classroom's platform deployed by AUL and some screenshots taken from the tutorials conducted for academic staff in preparation for online teaching during the COVID-19 crisis. Google Classroom was adopted because it was one of the best and simple-to-learn-and-operate technologies. The methodology thus involved participant-observation, manual online data harvesting from the Google Classroom platform, and selected slides from the presentations made during the training exercise for staff prior to the commencement of the virtual teaching. Additional data was extracted from an unscheduled telephone interview and interaction with another language teacher at AUL. The dataset was subjected to qualitative content analysis based on theoretical constructs discussed above.

4. Presentation and description of data

AUL started its online classes in May 2020 after about one-week training for its staff. The use of Google Classroom as the platform of choice was based on its simple technical affordances, its integration to Google Mail Services and easy compatibility with virtually all the operating systems and mobile devices. Since Google Classroom does not mandatorily require a complex and sit-in desktop computer, most students and staff found it very convenient to use their smartphones to participate in class discussions and access online contents shared by their lecturers. Both staff and students had been trained on how to use the platform prior to the full deployment of the technology.

The first phase of the preparation for lecturers involved training programmes on how to register students on the platform, lecture schedule management, attendance management, reports submission, managing course assessment tests, and conducting examinations. The training programmes also included how to use exam.net for course assessments and examination. A few of the screenshots from the AUL website are shown in supplementary materials.

It is noteworthy that the series of training organised by the ICT unit was instrumental to the success of the near-seamless remote teaching and learning at AUL during the pandemic-driven lockdown. Both administrative and academic procedures such as class scheduling, students and teachers' attendance and online participation, submissions of reports, and examination verifications were integrated on the platform (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). The initial apprehension among members of staff especially those with minimal ICT skills was addressed with confidence-building strategies adopted during the training. AUL students were equally trained on how to use the platform hence they were able to participate actively in the virtual classes from different parts of the country. For example, one of my students in the ENG 422 (multilingualism) class lives in the north-eastern part of the country. She was able to attend the online classes and wrote the exams virtually along with others in Lagos, and other parts of the country. Thankfully, the Google Classroom platform offers near-seamless synchronous CMC that fosters wider reach and

intensive interaction between the lecturer and the students as discussed further in the next section (Figure 3).

Figure 1. Online examination in progress

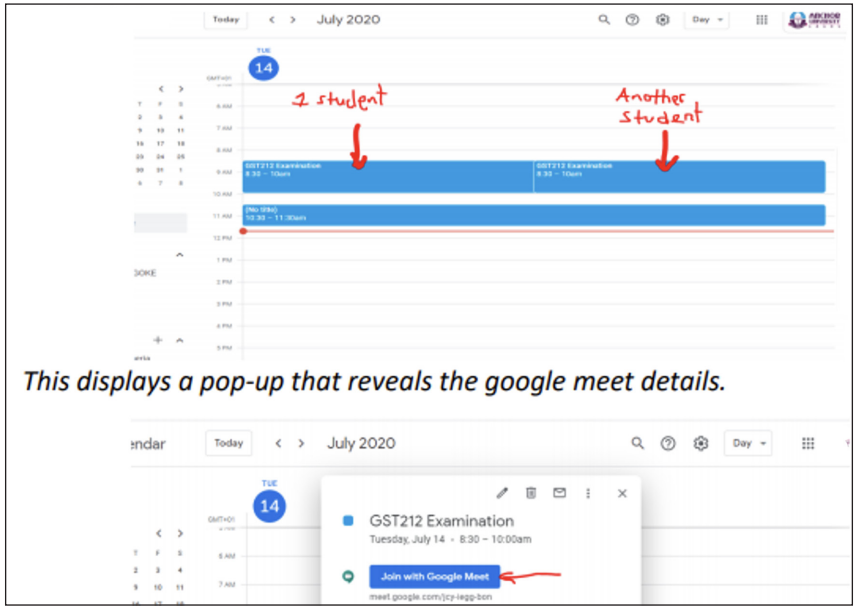


Figure 2. Students' examination verification and authentication process

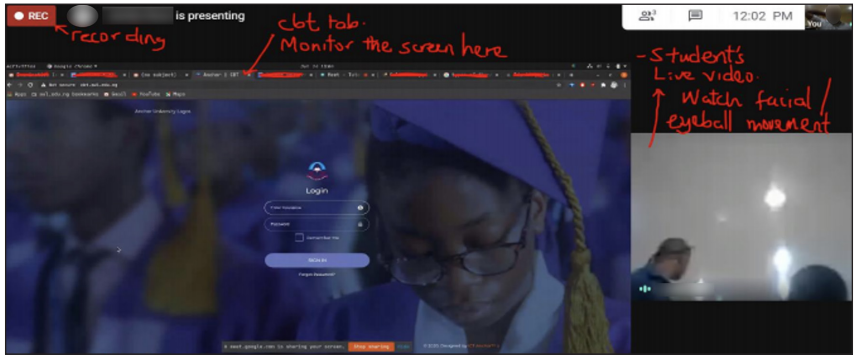
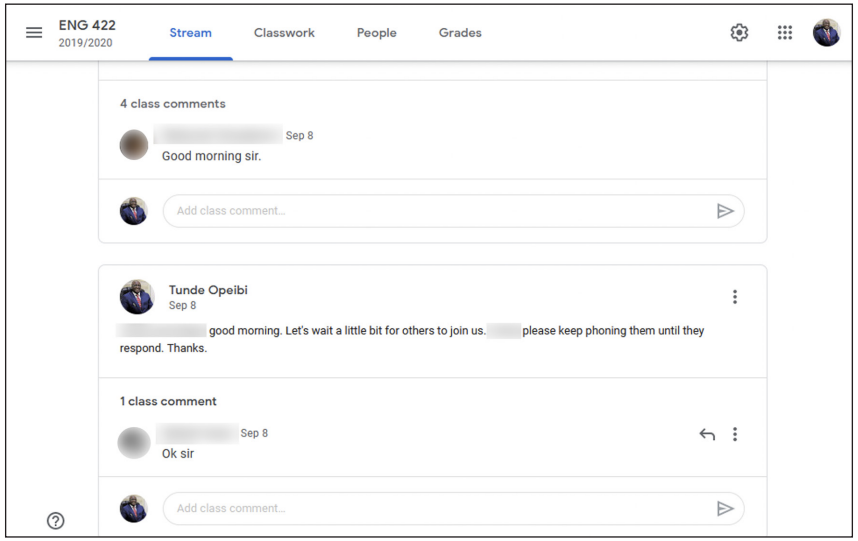


Figure 3. A typical synchronous interaction on Google Classroom platform



5. Discussion

In Zhu, Herring, and Bonk (2019), evidence shows that using CMDA can help to better understand how patterns in online communication can show "how teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence are manifested in an online learning environment" (p. 1). This study confirms this perspective as demonstrated in the excerpts discussed below.

In this section, I present a typical classroom interaction in one of the courses that I taught during the pandemic lockdown. The course titled 'Multilingualism' was a compulsory final year course. Out of five students that registered for the course, the number of those who were active fluctuated between three and four. One student could not join the online class due to a number of environmental, financial, and infrastructural challenges. The class started on May 4th, 2020 and ended on September 8th, 2020. It was a two-unit course and we had the class twice a week for two hours lasting up to 17 weeks.

From the screencast presented in the previous section, it is clear that the university management painstakingly created the resources and training opportunities for staff and students to maximise the resources on the platforms for a seamless online learning environment. The enhancement of the online learning environment is amplified through the deployment of new technologies, especially Google Classroom, Google Meet, exam.net, and WhatsApp that created active interactive sessions. Teachers had the option to adopt either text-based synchronous content delivery, audio-visual mode, or a hybrid method. It was however discovered most teachers and students chose the text-based mode because it was less costly and more effective due to poor internet network in most locations in Nigeria. The text-based online mode allows teachers and students to interact by simply using the keyboard functions to type their instructions and responses in real-time. Many participants found the interactions easy and exciting because the students are already familiar with the technicality of sending SMS and posting private chats on WhatsApp, Instagram, and Twitter. The experience thus shows clearly that the students transferred some socio-technical habits used in other traditional social media platforms to the online teaching environments. The advantage was that it helped them to adapt quickly and easily to the new remote learning environment especially by engaging effectively in synchronous real-time discourse practice.

In terms of style and language, the study observed a mixture of formal and informal expressions in the online academic discourse. While the formal learning environment was recognised, a number of conversational discursive features occurred in the virtual interactive space.

One important discourse feature of the technology-driven learning environment is the use of conversational tones that elicited some level of familiarity between the lecture and the students. This strategy is important to encourage the social and cognitive presence of the learners during the class. In the excerpts below extracted from the Google platform, the lecturer displays high teaching presence through the use of (phatic) expressions that promote familiar social relationship and sometimes mixed with a positive emotional tone in order to create an open communication environment for student-teacher interaction (Zhu et al.,

2019). Phatic expressions include social pleasantries that merely perform social functions indicating the willingness of the speakers and listeners to observe conventional local expectations for politeness and mutual conversation. For instance, in some of the excerpts, the lecturer announces his online presence with phatic expressions such as "Good morning class…" or "Dear students it is my pleasure to welcome you to this platform…".

In order to enhance learning, the lecturer relies on the feature of synchronous CMC on the platform. The style helped to compensate for the absence of face-to-face in-person interaction and encourage a positive feedback mechanism. The process also enabled the sustenance of interactivity through friendly questioning strategies. Examples include "we want to start in the next two mins, are we ready?". In addition, the use of the inclusive 'we' in some of the screencasts is a discourse strategy used by the lecturer to create a friendly rapport, gain the attention of the learners, and establish familiarity with the students; consider the six examples in Table 1.

Table 1. Examples of discourse between the lecturer and the students

1	Lecturer	"Dear students, I hope we are all getting along. Do you have any questions so far?"
	Student 1	"None"
2	Lecturer	"Brillant! Thank you [Student 2] and [Student 5], [Student 1] I'm waiting for yours."
	Students	[silence]
	Lecturer	"What again can we say about language policy? Each of you should provide at least two sentences"
3	Lecturer	"Now before I finally release you to get ready for your exams, let me mention two or three concepts more that are associated with multilingualism. These include, diglossia, codeswitching, speech community etc. Please do read them up"
	Student 1	"Okay sir"
4	Lecturer	"Now I will arrange a make-up test on Friday for those who missed the tests. Remind me on Thursday after getting clarification from your HOD"
	Student 2	"Yes sir, thank you so much sir"
5	Student 3	"Thank you sir, have a blessed day"
	Lecturer	"Best wishes to you all, do enjoy the rest of the week."

6	Lecturer	"If you don't have any questions, please ensure you read all the notes, materials and texts that are relevant to the course. I wish you all the best and pray that the good Lord will empower you to excel in Jesus' name. Amen. Do enjoy the rest of the week! Cheers!"
	Student 4	"Thank you sir"

From the six excerpts, it is noticed that the socio-technical affordances of the platform were used to promote social relationships in the course of the lectures which also enhanced learning possibilities. For example, the instructor attempts to establish a warm teacher-student online relationship and positive learning environment by adopting discourse strategies that close social gaps. In a phone call interview conducted with a few of the students, the feedback was very encouraging. They confirmed that the class was very interactive and the rate of assimilation of course content by the students was very high.

The excerpts also reveal other interesting discourse features. One, as a component of the online discursive practice, there are sociolinguistic cues that define the relationship between the lecturer and the students, which is a reflection of the sociocultural context where respect for teachers and lecturers plays out prominently in in-person classroom interactions. With the transference of offline behaviour to the online platform, the students' online discourse behaviour is thus highly influenced by their knowledge of the status differentiation and politeness requirements in the status-conscious society. In Nigeria, students are required to show maximum respect and deference to their lecturers in almost all matters with the use of discourse markers such as Sir and Ma'am. Some of the extracts above show the frequent use of the expressions like "yes sir", "okay sir", and "thank you so much sir" during the online lectures. This social norm reflects the strict observance and conformity to existential modes of addressing in this formal context. It also demonstrates how online environments still accommodate offline discursive practices as a system of rule-sharing where appropriateness in language use plays a key role in student-lecturer classroom discourse.

Two, we find another significant registerial feature that reflects the sociocultural context social relationship between the lecturer and the students shows forth in the use of socio-religious expressions. The religious-based expression from

the students demonstrates the success of the social relationships built online over the 17-week period and a reflection of the university's approbational sociocultural context. The discourse fragment in Excerpt 4 is consistent with the policy, values, and practice at AUL as a faith-based institution owned by the Deeper Christian Life Ministry, a Christian religious organisation in Nigeria. It is very common to find frequent use of religious expressions within and outside learning environments. In fact, religious activities are a mandatory component of the extra-curricular activities in the institution. Generally speaking, religious expressions are acceptable in conventional university environments in Nigeria although the country claims to be a secular state. Both Christian and Islamic organisations have strong and flourishing educational institutions in the country that allow students and staff to practise their faiths. The mapping of the offline discourse behaviour into online learning environments enhances remote learning and supports scholars' views on the interconnectedness between offline and online discourse habits especially as the use of smartphones and social media networks continues to proliferate among young people.

Three, this COVID-19 crisis has revealed the power of digital technologies for teaching and learning in low-income and middle-income countries. This socio-technological advantage of the wide use of mobile phones in Nigeria has obviously equipped most students at AUL with the skills to use these devices for other online learning activities beyond private conversations and entertainment. It is against that backdrop that it was easy for management of the university to convince the students to migrate to remote teaching and learning. The university also has a relatively strong infrastructural base and availability of modern technologies to support that decision. It is little wonder that AUL was able to conclude the academic year successfully even during the lockdown, a decision that was commended by the parents of the students and other stakeholders.

Additionally, in teaching language-based courses, colleagues adopted a mixed method approach that accommodated asynchronous and synchronous CMC. Apart from using text-based modes on Google Classroom, some lecturers used video conferencing by relying on platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, and WhatsApp. The audio-visual interactions helped to authenticate the online

presence of the students and monitor their active participation in class activities. In order to compensate for the absence of language laboratories in online environments for practical courses like phonology and phonetics, lecturers adopted a simulation method. This involved recording the spoken language practice on WhatsApp voice notes, and transmitting such to students. The students were then required to recognise the sound production, practice the sounds, and send back their own sound productions through the same medium after about 30 minutes. The bidirectional asynchronous audio-visual method reinforced the lecture delivery using text-based online interactions through the Google Classroom platform.

Based on this study, one can deduce that remote teaching may adopt both synchronous and asynchronous methods and a mixed method depending on the platforms being used to facilitate such online learning. For instance, Google Classroom as a learning platform, to a large extent, favours synchronous CMC methods of teaching and learning where both teachers and learners interact in real-time. In an attempt to complement and improve effective remote teaching, a video conferencing platform can be used alongside the Google Classroom. Thankfully, the archival capacity of the platform allows learners to return to the platform and extract some or all of the notes posted during real-time lecture periods.

From my unscheduled interview session with two of the colleagues that taught courses in phonetics and phonology during this period, they overcame the challenges of teaching those courses online with the aid of enhanced simulations. This method assisted learners to use online teaching aids in learning sounds as well as reproducing them. The teachers made use of a software package (Audacity) to record sounds for their students. The students were required to listen to the sounds and reproduce them with Praat – sound analytical software. Also, the exam.net assessment platform provided another interesting working environment with the use of drawing tools. This tool helped learners to draw charts and tables, and engage in similar phonology-related practical exercises. It was observed that these online tools improved the learning of those language-based courses.

6. Conclusion

The study has shown the growing interest in remote teaching and learning at AUL as a result of the pandemic that forced many institutions to rethink their strategies and reimagine teaching in a post-covid era. The consequential public health crisis has now provided an entirely new and exciting teaching and learning experience for both faculty and students. The initial apprehension about the difficulty in exploring the new technologies soon gave way to excitement and determination to explore the new approaches given the commitment of the university management to press forward with the migration from in-person learning to remote teaching platforms during the period. Many of the teachers have now acquired additional ICT skills as a result of the use of the new platforms for remote pedagogy. Despite the social disruptions caused by the lockdown, a compensatory social bonding between lecturers and students was promoted through online affordances based on the CMC strategy, enhancing the learning environment.

Although one cannot be blindsided to some of the challenges confronting the use of technology for online teaching in this part of the world, remote work was largely successful at AUL during the period. Some of the challenges such as high cost of data, lack of stable power supply, access to laptop and functional smartphones, and poor internet connection in some parts of the country still constitute some drawbacks to effective and productive remote teaching during the period. This study observes that the success of remote teaching at AUL was based on the commitment and clear-sighted decision by management to deploy digital platforms for a full semester of virtual teaching. The experience, though a learning curve for faculty and students, has redefined higher education pedagogy in the country and may become a viable alternative in the future (e.g. Lederman, 2020; Mishra, Gupta, & Shree, 2020; Renfrow, 2020).

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8. Supplementary materials

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