

Reimagined Strategies: A Case of Face-to-Face to Remote Transformed Language Learning

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Abstract: For this investigation a qualitative research approach was followed. To identify the underlying challenges, this paper aimed at probing the extent at which remote transformed language learning had on language development. To produce in-depth understanding of factors regarded to be challenges in real life situations the investigation objectives were aimed at identifying whether transformed online learning had any significant importance towards language development. The main challenge that led to authors undertaking this study was emergent remote learning that swept away face-to-face collaborations thereby bringing some concerns in language learning. For some learners and teachers, necessary skills to embark on this journey were lacking, let alone limited availability to internet connectivity in most areas where learners are located. For the purposes of this investigation a case study was administered. Effects of language development in a remote manner as an emergent strategy were explored for study. Participants were purposefully selected from one university located in an Eastern Cape rural environment. These three English language teachers were nominated from the larger group of language teacher as they had experienced changes brought about by emergence of the pandemic era, as such had some not so appealing experiences when teaching an unfamiliar language during this period, yet, English is a medium for most subjects offered. Such teachers offered English language at year one of first entering learners (FTENS). For this qualitative study embedded in a case study design, data were collected through administration of semi structured interviews. As this type of instrument contained open-ended questions, it was divulged by the analysed data that intermediation strategies and restricted exposure to a wide range of digital teaching and learning platforms hence rurality of the environment where the research site was located, was found to be a major challenge in relation to language-learning aspects inclusive of reading, speaking and writing. From the findings of this study it emerged that reading comprehension as an essential language learning skill was being compromised by lack of access to eLearning resources. For enhanced language development, authors conclude that both teachers and learners as recipients to learning should develop positive learning and teaching attitude need to be developed among teachers and learners towards digital learning. Engaging in such platforms capacitate all for life-long learning. It is recommended by this study that libraries situated in institutions of higher learning together with those located in the districts need to prioritise on purchasing sufficient e-learning resources to accommodate a wide range of learners for an inculcated culture of language enhancement, likely to lead at improved academic attainment. Further than that, as scholars we have an urgent need to be well vexed of e-learning logistics, thereby safeguarded at being victims of digital divide.

Keywords: Reading, Online learning, Teaching, Language development, Strategies

1. Introduction

Changes brought about by the heat wave of COVID-19 phase have led to transformed teaching approaches (Loades, Chatburn, Higson-Sweeney, Reynolds, Shafran, Brigden & Crawley, 2020). Transmission rate of language learning got affected by the sudden changes not only as a South African perspective, but to the entire countries of the universe. Emergence of digital learning strategies have now resulted at collaborative engagements between teachers and learners; with online learning making it possible to transfer knowledge and information across the world

within a specified time in seconds or minutes (Judith, 2019). This transformed learning in the current era has brought emergence of the prefix 'e'. Citing a few examples we can mention e-learning, e-business, e-commerce and a plethora of others, this signifying extensive electronic technology application (Aguilar, 2012).

Transitioning face-to-face language learning to suit remote strategies has real been a hassle due to a wide range of factors regarded as glitches specifically for learning administered in the so-called rural disadvantaged centres of learning (Osguthorpe &

Graham, 2003). When acquisition of language proficiency is distracted, it may raise proficiency learning alarm to language specialist envisaged school curriculum have texts to be comprehended, thus requiring language aspects like reading, speaking, reading, writing, punctuation, vocabulary and spelling, of which all these are somehow compromised by transformed remote learning (Kerr, 2015).

Technology and its mysterious ways of doing things is the act to be mastered through training, exposure and transformed attitudes by teachers and learners as recipients of teaching and learning (Alper, Meryl & Goggin, 2017). This became a significant initiative when universities during total shut down of schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic era had no other choice than to embark on elearning, which was really a huge hassle. Mostly traditional face-to-face mode of engagements was a preferred recipe in the university investigated. It was therefore imperative for us to conduct an investigation to answer the question: To what extent does remote transformed language learning affect re-imagined teaching and learning strategies? Further than that, infused technology teaching and learning, not particularly in the schooling environment, but also in libraries and other communities of development, is a step worth to embark on as a way to capacitate future generation who would be able to compete globally in the digitally transformed innovations (Gillen, 2014).

2. Literature Review

This is the section where a portion of previously published work is critically reviewed and analysed by comparing it with preceding research studies, thereby summarily refining it into own classifications as perceived by individual authors (Western Sydney University Library, 2017). Reviewing literature sources helps towards determination of existing resources whereby scholars critically analyse theories to identify gaps that would assist towards future research inquiries (University of Melbourne, 2013).

2.1 Empirical Literature

2.1.1 Infused Technology Learning

As transformed teaching and learning has been brought to be a major concept in the schooling system since eruption of COVID-19, so have to teaching methodologies and strategies, as well as re-defined learning styles by university learners across the

spectrum (Blignaut, 2020). These emergent changes in the past few decades resulted to foremost transformations arising not within the education sector only, but in other sectors that necessitate growth and development for the human nature. Collaborative learning in the current era has brought about serious awareness for technology-driven interventions to people of all ages, hence the digital world. Thus, Gillett-Swan (2017) proposes for innovated remote learning or schooling paradigm.

However, recent changes of shifting from face-to-face to remote teaching and learning in some universities located in rural settings posed challenges encountered by both learners and teachers as recipients to learning, in a way, causing some digital divide. Such innovations are in line with Pegrum (2014) who advocates for universities to employ effective use of information computer technologies. On the other hand, Haight, Quan-Haase and Corbett (2014) argue for users who display reluctance towards transformation, yet, as authors we propose that such changes be adored by all as they provide consolidated skills that aid at attaining new, interesting, yet flexible prospects to learning. On attaining such computer skills as core to remote learning, learners get exposure to diverse life-long learning and positive anticipated future employability prospects.

2.1.2 Resources as a Fundamental Requirement to Remote Learning

In this new-fangled dispensation, tertiary institutions and schools are confronted with challenges of access to internet. Hockly and Dudeney (2014) contend that obstacles of connectivity lead to hassles at making institutions of higher learning to be full-blown elearning centres, specifically for those identified to be located in the historically disadvantaged rural environments. In addition to that, infrastructure, lack of expertise in computer literacy-related learning really poses challenges granting universities as far-flanged digital learning sites. As articulated by Zhu, Valcke and Schellens (2009), lack of infrastructure coupled with connectivity that is affordable poses great challenges for diverse sectors around the world. From a study conducted in Ghana (ICT and Global Education, 2008) Africa is a continent renown of its calamities. These include political inclination and insecurities, deprivation in services delivered, a literacy and inadequate infrastructure. Research also denotes that Africa, when compared to other developing versus developed states has the minimal internet infiltration.

Additionally, the above statements are supported by Beyene and Aasheim (2018) who argue on limited availability of e-learning gadgets in most institutions of learning. A study conducted by Jain (2013) in Delhi observed that a great number of schools had very limited numbers of e-learning related gadgets. For an institution of higher learning learning to have insufficient elearning gadgets really concerns us, as this inadequacy of tools of trade is tantamount to hindered transformation of language learning.

To mention, other institutions were reported to be using old computers not serviced timeously. In Western Sydney, for learning institutions to encounter limited and inappropriate eLearning material, such can be congruently measured to disturbed curriculum implementation, thus leading to the not so good attitudes and frustrations to language learning (Milton & Vozzo, 2013). Languages, with all compound and diverse aspects inclusive of listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary, spelling and fluency are likely to be hindered when an institution lacks access to the necessary resources aimed towards enhancing learner language proficiency.

2.1.3 Intervention Strategies

Correspondingly, teaching-learning processes should be transformed from the previous normal face-to-face mode to suit the proposed remote learning. Transitioning efficiency solely depends on preparedness on all parties involved, technology equipment, as well as inclusive training and workshopping of both teachers and learners as recipients granted to be at the core of learning progressions (Ray, 2020). At a stage when learning remotely has been successfully invented, the intended educational curriculum administered either within the schooling environment or in a remote mode, would be enhanced through employed teaching and learning technologies.

On the main, it is worth to note that methodologies and strategies previously used when conducting face-to-face interventions might not be favourable enough for the currently transformed mode of schooling, especially in this transformed digital era. Both teachers and learners as they are not acquainted to administration of remote-distant mode of instruction, some intervention strategies like consistent trainings then become a vital instrument intended towards limiting inability attitudes for all. Furthermore, even at times when schools were forced to be on total shutdown due to extensive

spread of COVID-19 ailments, remote learning took over at providing connection prospects for both teachers and learners, thereby interacting and brainstorming on the content, with context, irrespective of non-contact sessions. This was an emergent situation, worth exploring. Favourable outcomes, as affirmed by Papouli, Chatzifotiou and Tsairidis (2020), were improved computer literate abilities previously regarded to be in very minimal percentages. Be that as it may, there are some attitudes of negativity still noted as a deficiency towards elearning capabilities (Ramrathan, 2017).

Consequently, in relation to experiences of learning remotely, as disputed by Palansamy (2020), it is how remote processes are structured that becomes a determinant for teacher and learner success. As scholars might recall that remote learning often arouses when the country is held tight by emergent crucial circumstances. It is worth to note that all stakeholders involved in the education sector at that point in time become fragile and vulnerable. With that being noted, it becomes advisable for teachers and learners not to be assigned new tasks. This, therefore, as outlined by Alper, Meryl and Goggin (2017) means that for effective and efficient remote learning, curriculum managers have a task to redesign a well demarcated and clearly defined plan of instruction. Substantial elements of such a plan might comprise taking serious considerations of technology equipment, time constraints and re-defined teaching-learning approaches, in so doing, learning anxieties may be minimal.

2.2 Theoretical Literature

Underpinning this paper is the Model of Teacher Change (Guskey, 1986). Emergent transformation in the schooling environment with COVID-19 regulations to be observed by all recipients to learning, led us to strengthen our investigation with this Model of Teacher Change. Looking at the previous teaching and learning collaborations, a greatest percentage was administered in a face-to-face mode of delivery, where the teacher or instructor would present the lesson in a venue-based setting, with sitting plans that catered for both pair and group engagements. Drastic changes in the rules governing the country affected the schooling logic as well, hence the investigation of this article.

As ecological changes, beliefs and attitudes deprived learning recipients of the old and previous norms of

doing things, changes led to education being conducted in a remote manner. These changes led to revisions, re-imagining, and thereby re-inventing teaching and learning strategies well aligned to cater shifting from face-to-face, to transformed remote strategies likely to enhance learner language proficiency. At the same time, one would raise a very serious concern. Despite rurality of some environments, are the situations accommodative enough to cater for such changes or are the poor of the poorest left to look for a needle in a haystack! Notwithstanding limited digital practises from some teachers, remote elearning has now come into existence, therefore, it becomes worthwhile to note that a huge number of recipients involved have buckled up to acquaint themselves with elearning logistics. As authors, on applauding such improvement and dedication, the country is never the same as it was before. Multitudes of people in the education sector have alarmingly improved their elearning and digital skills, an acceptable indication for growth, wealth and self-independency.

For enhanced language proficiency through shifting towards remote processes as opined by the objective of this paper, we, therefore, support the educational implication that both language teachers and learners, irrespective of rurality of environments they emanate from, may need to embark on practices to acquaint themselves in various digital e-learning platforms. Engaging in using e-Learning may not only anticipated to language learning, instead, to innovated reading and comprehension skills. As proposed by Guskey's theory, advancement in language skills is surely a gateway to excelled academic attainment as most subjects underpinning the institutions' curriculum compose of texts to comprehended (Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development, 2017). When required comprehension skills are lacking, progression throughput rate may be hindered.

3. Methodology

Research methodology refers to structuring processes when undertaking research. Varying types of research have specific and differing methodologies (Creswell, 2009). Commonly used methodologies normally comprise research design, data gathering as well as analysis. Methodology in research is intended to outline notifications on why an investigation has been conducted, how the problem investigated has been demarcated, data collection and data analysis

procedures (Sweetman, Badiee & Creswell, 2010). When these methodological logistics have been observed, the problem then becomes systematically unravelled. All these methods have an ultimate goal to collect data, evaluate that data already collected yet not sufficing enough to arrive at essential solution, towards determining some connections in-between gathered data and findings still to emerge, as well as evaluating accuracy from the findings divulged. This, therefore, means that research methodology is constituted by research methods.

3.1 Approach

In this inquiry authors have followed a qualitative research methodology embedded in a case study design. This approach has an objective to generate in-depth understanding for some real-life situation complexities (Denzin, 2018). For the purposes of this inquiry, we administered a case study with reasons to obtain deeper understanding of underlying factors with regards to sudden language learning transformations brought about by emergent prescribed regulations as emanated from COVID-19 restrictions. This re-imagining of teaching-learning strategies really needed one to undergo deep inquiry as some challenging factors to emergent remote elearning had to be examined as means to unfold some truths in relation to realities experiences by people around the world.

3.2 Sampling

Participants for this investigation were purposefully selected (Myers, 2020). These were participants amongst the plenty who offered English language in a rurally located varsity. These three teachers purposively accepted to be part of our investigation. What probed interest to take part is that they had experienced changes brought about by emergence of the pandemic era, as such had some not so appealing experiences when teaching an unfamiliar language during this period, yet, English is a medium for most subjects offered. These were teachers who offered English language at year one of first entering learners (FTENS). These three participants then became primary sources hence the investigation was rooted in a case study design.

3.3 Research Instruments

As articulated by Guest, Namey, Taylor, Eley and McKenna (2017), this investigation administered

semi structured interviews as an instrument that helped at collecting data. Questions contained were open-ended, thereby allowing for robust discussions, engagements, and collaborations. The entire process led to us posing some follow up questions which were not primarily designed to reflect in the interview schedule. Due to work commitment by participants, time to meet and interview each independent participant had to be lengthened. All three participants willingly engaged in discussions solely because as authors we had assured them that ethical considerations were to be adhered to, with promises not to divulge their proper identities, as well as explanations that they were free to withdraw from the project at any given point if they would have feelings of intimidation or insecurity (Brinkman, 2013).

Engagements with participants commenced sometime around February 2022. Both interviewers and interviewees had challenging time constraints as the interview process had to be adjourned sometime in March 2022 since both parties were held up tight in administration of special examinations for some learners. Another factor that hindered progress was consistent training and workshops that had to be attended to put on board teaching logistics. As the process was undertaken, authors had confined themselves at a task to take some recordings of participant responses. The major aim for this activity was to ensure that not even a single response would be taken as minor or for granted, thus leading to obtaining rich data to assist during time of analysis. All questions asked revolved around teaching-learning strategies that had to be redefined as there was a shift from face-to-face to remote learning.

3.4 Method of Data Analysis

After those robust engagements between the two parties were over, authors gave themselves momentous time to interact with each recording. This process helped authors to transcribe all participant responses with great consideration. Those regarded as similar to each other were grouped under the same category. Lastly, codes were re-grouped, leading to formation of themes discussed as findings in the next section.

4. Results

4.1 Intermediation Strategies

From the findings it was divulged that there was an

imperative to train teachers and learners. Some still have attitudes on e-learning and strongly believe on traditional teaching-learning methodologies. When questioned about level of knowledge regarding online learning, Participant S1 responded:

Thanks to the arrival of the pandemic era in our country, if it was not for it, I would still be that teacher with lacking skills. I cannot pride myself, but at least I know the basics of interacting with online learning gadgets like computers. I am never the same person as I was before.

Participant S2 had a similar response:

As I had no knowledge whatsoever in the previous normal, I strongly believed in face-to-face collaborations. I am now proud to note that through workshops conducted by the departmental officials, my knowledge of using online teaching and learning resources has improved. Nonetheless, more still needs to be done. It is my wish that trainings should be conducted at least once monthly as transitioning is really not an easy task.

Regarding mechanisms that are in a collaborative manner, strategic plans have to be put in place to accommodate training of teachers and learners towards attaining the necessary skills of tackling all the necessary language aspects by using digital technologies. One needs to consider that such a factor might be constrained by capabilities of human resource in the unit intended to conduct trainings. Akintunde (2007) contends that even at university level most learners have yet not being fully capacitated to interrogate elearning gadgets, thus denoting lack of skill in computer-related learning (Odame, Lois, Bertha Osei-Hwedie, Nketsia, Opoku & Arthur, 2019). This finding is in line with the previously discussed notion on human resource trainers, thus deliberately derailing eLearning interventions.

4.2 Lack of Access to Resources

The second finding observed that time constraints were a burning factor, allowing only a specific number of learners at a given time to access elearning gadgets due to lack of resources (Atinmo, 2000). Further than that, the least available gadgets at the school library has gadgets which are no longer in good working condition. This makes learners to suffer exposure to a wide range of digital teaching

and learning platforms. An alarming finding in this cohort is in line with limited network coverage/connectivity. In response to lack of access to resources, Participant S3 reported:

With a limited number of computers in the school where I work, delays and quarrels have since emerged amongst all teachers offering computer-related subjects. As the period lapses for another group of learners to access the only available computer laboratory, time is spent as they run around chasing to arrive first in a properly functional laptop. By the time the period ends for the first group to leave the laboratory, learners start complaining with protests that much time was wasted whilst fighting over accessing the stated resources.

In this regard, Participant S1 concurred when reporting that:

Limitation in the number of available online learning material is worsened by non-functional resources stored in our library. If the management could take serious note of what we experience as teachers on the ground, they would not delay ensuring that repairs are a norm. This would increase the number of readily available online resources in our school.

Participant S2 also alluded as previously indicated by others:

Connectivity problems seem to cause great challenges for us. Whilst busy conducting an online class, some learners would report to be experiencing problems to log in due to network glitches. This is a situation that needs economic sustenance as most learners are deprived. For the learning institution to be located in a rural environment is associated with being deprived in WIFI connections.

Technology learning as a valuable resource needs great consideration as this is a tool that draws lines of boundaries between traditional and remote elearning divide. Be that as it may, nature of the environments becomes problematic in this instance. In cases where an institution has plenty gadgets to suffice all learners, such resources should be dispatched for learners to take home with. At the same time, as this investigation was conducted in an institution of higher learning located in a vast rural learning environment, one would not wonder to learn that there are few elearning gadgets readily available for all (Beyene, 2016). This calls for positive

mind-sets to be ready to share the least available resources during and within the learning environment, to benefit all. Last but not least, glitches of network connectivity are a real hassle beyond explanation as most people around the suffer consequences. We do not know whether this challenge is caused by a huge number of users, or it is triggered by the rurality of the environment where the university is located (Mutual, 2008).

Findings that were discovered by this study are in line with the Model of Teacher Change (Guskey, 1986) that underpinned this paper. This model proposes for transformation in the schooling environment. Teaching and learning collaborations that were previously conducted in face-to-face venue-based collaborations were replaced by the now so-called vibrant online learning engagements. Although resolutions to engage in an online fashion came as some kind of enforcement due to school closer and social distancing parameters, online teaching and learning skills have been enhanced in most users. As ecological changes, beliefs and attitudes deprived learning recipients of the old and previous norms of doing things, changes led to education being conducted in a remote manner. These changes led to revisions, re-imagining, and thereby re-inventing teaching and learning strategies well aligned to cater shifting from face-to-face, to transformed remote strategies likely to enhance learner language proficiency.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

For this investigation a qualitative research approach was followed with specific reasons of having an advantage to produce in-depth understanding of the factors that are regarded to be challenges in real life situations. The main challenge that led to the authors undertaking this study was that emergent remote learning that swept away face-to-face collaborations had brought about some concerns in language learning. For some learners and teachers, necessary skills to embark on this journey were lacking, let alone limited availability of internet connectivity in most areas where learners are located. A case study was administered. Participants to this inquiry were three randomly selected English language teachers from an institution of higher learning located in the rural community of the Eastern Cape (EC) Province. For this qualitative study embedded in a case study design, data were collected through semi structured interviews. Findings to this

study divulged that intermediation strategies and restricted exposure to a wide range of digital teaching and learning platforms was found to be a major challenge. We conclude that teachers and learners should develop positivism towards digital learning. The study recommends that libraries situated in the institutions of higher learning should prioritise on purchasing sufficient e-learning resources.

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