Advocating for the Adoption of the Blended Learning Approach for Efficient English Language Lesson Delivery in Schools amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a major disruption in the education sector of the world; principally in the regular teaching-learning transactions, thereby necessitating for the adoption of the blended learning approach in schools. Blended learning has the potential of fostering students learning outcomes as well as teachers' effectiveness in teaching. The paper explored the import and applicability of the blended learning approach in English language teaching and learning. The elements, models, advantages and disadvantages, factors affecting teachers' adoption and inherent challenge of the approach, were discussed. It was thus suggested that: schools (the upper basic, secondary and tertiary) adopt or adapt the blended learning approach in their teaching and learning processes; teachers and students at these levels, be professionally trained or retrained on the technicalities of the blended learning approach; schools be equipped with information and communication technology devices as well as the provision of appropriate learning environments and increased funding for the education sector; as these are prerequisites through which the blended learning approach can foster.

Key words: Blended Learning, COVID-19 Pandemic, English Language, Teaching and Learning, Schools

Introduction

Language is a coordinated system and a vital tool for communication among living creatures. It is a means through which thoughts, ideas, friendships, economic and cultural ties are maintained and sustained. A language directs the way individuals see the world and the culture within it. The learning of languages can positively tame peoples' minds and personality. It can be informative, expressive and directive in function. The teaching and learning of languages, especially the English language is essential in today's world, been considered as the worlds' foremost Lingua Franca.

The English language has proved useful in the field of education, information and communication technology, tourism and travels, business; to mention but a few. The process of language learning is exclusive and dissimilar amongst students (Banditvilai, 2016), and it is a necessary tool that can equip and impart skills in students with which they can address real-life situations (Aborisade, 2013). English language teaching and learning is a demanding process and teachers in the field do choose the best methods for content delivery in order to facilitate students' better learning outcomes in the subject (Shraim & Khlaif, 2010). According to Comas-Quinn (2011), a single teaching method cannot have all the features requisite for achieving the full benefits of English language teaching and learning.

The current challenges in the education system necessitate a 'Plan B' for effective, efficient and safe lesson delivery, particularly when schools are forced to shut down. Hence, the easy access to digital and media resources for English language lesson delivery and learning cannot be underplayed. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the educational status of many countries, as many students and teachers at all levels of education (pre-primary, primary, secondary and tertiary) have been shut out of the teaching-learning system; resulting in a drastic and dramatic change in the education structures. As reported by UNESCO (2020), the COVID-

19 pandemic has affected the worlds' educational systems as schools are under lock and key, with the hope of controlling the spread of the pandemic. In recent times, especially due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a clamour for e-learning in schools and that institutions of learning provide avenues for students' offline collaborative work and online self-study (Aborisade, 2013). The pandemic has harmfully impacted on the routine educational systems, causing a key obstacle in the provision of quality teaching and learning, including digital learning (Karp & McGowan, 2020; Lindzon, 2020). It has resulted into a paradigm shift in the sector, exposing the need to urgently reconsider the current conventional teaching-learning mode.

Nonetheless, the traditional classroom teaching and learning is necessary in encouraging students' public speaking skills (Siew-Enga & Muuk, 2015). Still, students can learn efficiently both in online platforms as well as in the conventional classroom settings (Donnely, 2010). The global use of smart phones, internet and the decreasing cost of technology may have strongly redefined the teaching and learning processes in recent times. The current development and complexity of internet-based technologies has elicited the online learning platforms which is now a common approach for instruction delivery in most tertiary institutions (Poquet et al., 2015).

These internet-based learning technologies have been grouped into: information technologies that is for access to and delivery of information; interactive and communication technologies that support user interaction; and social software technologies which mediate group-based activities (Anderson, 2008). The social software technology is the pillar of the blended learning approach, as it allows group-based learning activities for distance learners. For blended learning to be appropriated in the teaching and learning of the English language, the English teacher should be technologically-literate for it to produce positive results (Pardo-Gonzalez, 2013). Kerres and De Witt (2003), asserted the need for a didactic instruction framework planning and designing which is subsumed in blended learning.

The term blended learning originated from the world of business and corporate training (Sharma & Barrett, 2007). Blended learning combine computer-assisted online actions with conventional face-to-face teaching; otherwise known as 'chalk-and-talk'. The adoption of it, to a large extent, do add valued and current dimensions to the teaching-learning processes; as it permits learners to learn at their individual pace and teachers are provided the opportunity of bridging the content gaps. Blended Learning entails the concurrent use of the traditional teaching strategies and the e-learning strategy. It is using media and technology in an e-learning environment to boost the traditional teaching and learning transactions (Sharma, 2010). It is an innovative education mode that has both the merits of the conventional classroom teaching and learning formats, and the online format (Dangwal & Lata, 2017).

Blended learning is characterized by 'individualized' learning as learners are allowed to inquire and learn at their own speed and convenience, usually with the guidance of the teacher or a possible access to an online tutor (Horn & Staker, 2015). It is used in the teaching of English language as well as its translation; significantly enhancing students' learning attitude and satisfaction (Lou et al., 2013). Sun and Qiu (2017) asserted in their study that blended learning approach has been applied in the teaching of English language classes globally and has positive impact in improving students' efficiency and performance in the subject. Also, Kirchhoff (2005) posited that curriculum planners and course developers enshrine the models of blended learning into language teaching and learning. Derbel (2017) in her study explored the concept, reasons and implementation modes of blended learning while encouraging its adoption in teaching and learning programmes, adding that the English language teacher while implementing lesson delivery by the blended learning approach, should be effective and well coordinated.

Effective lesson delivery maximizes students' understanding, participation and quality of task performed. A teacher with good grasp of lesson delivery techniques could exhibit one or all of the following during instruction: begins lessons by giving clear instructions; ensures that every student is attentive while the lesson is on-going; eliminates all distractions during lessons; employ highly motivating activities; build lesson upon students' past knowledge; show enthusiasm and interest during teaching; reinforce students' efforts with praise; vary instructional methods; offer guided practice for students; monitor responses and deliver immediate corrective feedback; summarize the lesson and focus on positive gains made by students, and use positive reinforcements for compensating good behavior. Dabbs (2012) restated the criteria a good teachers should imbibe for effective lesson delivery, and they include: deciding on the appropriate delivery technique(s), pulling the students into the lesson, giving clear instructions while teaching, random selection of students during questioning, controlled pacing during teaching, show of variety and enthusiasm while delivering instruction and using formative assessment for evaluation and feedback purposes.

Kintu, Zhu, and Kagambe (2017) posited that a good teacher is one who is able to satisfy students' learning needs by embracing different teaching strategies. The adoption of blended learning as a mode of instruction have been on the rise, as it is effectual and causes a constructive impact on student learning outcomes, and it is now adopted in the elementary, secondary and tertiary institutions of learning (Guzer & Caner, 2013). However, for a sustainable blended learning, Moore and Kearsely (2011) argued that both teachers and learners must have the same instructional model and technological platforms at their disposal.

Lim, Morris and Kupritz (2007) restated the elements of a blended learning model: structured and unstructured learning, collaborative learning, offline and online learning, learning and working, and integration of either synchronous physical format and online formats or asynchronous physical and online formats. Blended learning has six key outcomes in language teaching, these may include: knowledge access, didactic richness, private agency, social interaction, revision ease and cost-effectiveness. Thus, this paper explores and advocates for the adoption of the blended learning approach for effective English language lesson delivery in schools amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

Twigg (2003) identified four blended learning models:

i. The replacement Model: this entails uploading instruction materials online and is mainly for students who are far away from the conventional classroom learning point. Classes are partially or fully replaced by online materials.

ii. The Supplemental Model: this is usually a model used for motivating and strengthening students who may be weak in performance. These students attend the usual face-to-face classes and have access to more technology inclined resources or courses.

iii. The Emporium Model: this model gives opportune and supplementary individualized set of materials to learners, with support from an instructor or teacher.

iv. The Buffet Model: this model allows for freedom and flexibility for learners, as learning is majorly online. Students under this model can design materials suitable to their individual objectives and learning styles.

Other notable blended learning models could include: *station rotation* - where students could learn online, collaboratively or in the presence of the teacher; *lab rotation* – where learning is only online and usually done in a computer labouratory; *individual rotation* – here, the schedule of students is set either by a software algorithm or the teacher; *flipped classroom* - students learn latest concepts at home through videos, exercises and reading, and relate their knowledge at school through guided projects by the teacher or an instructor; *A la carte* – here, students take part in both the traditional class and the online course; *enriched virtual model* - an substitute to the regular education mode. Students do most of their tasks online and have to attend the face-to-face instruction.

Advantages of blended learning
i.   Flexibility: blended learning strategy allows the flexible learning of complex contents and topics by students in a convenient way.
ii.   Effectiveness: blended learning has been found to foster effective and meaningful learning experiences among students.
iii. Efficiency: the blended learning strategy can be used in the delivery of lessons to a large number of students, efficiently.
iv.   Cost-effectiveness: blended learning reduces students' cost of learning; as they may learn remotely from the convenience of their homes.
v.   Personalization: blended learning allows student to learn in isolation. Students' learning experiences become personal and specific since students' learning interest, attitude and motivation varies.
vi.   Extended reach: the blended learning strategy often cut down the classroom teaching timeframe as against the traditional classrooms.
vii. Covers all learning styles: the blended learning strategy allows for a variety of learning styles, since the teaching and learning of a particular content has been 'blended'.
viii. Better communication and collaborative learning: blended learning is characterized by flexible communication between the teacher and students as well as promoting teacher-teacher, teacher-student and student-student collaboration. These are facilitated through the online learning platforms such as news announcement, online grading tool, instant messaging, online discussion, drop boxes, emails and blogs
ix.   For easy assessment of students learning skills and performance.
x.   Allows for students engagement with content and materials.

Disadvantages of Blended Learning
i.   High cost of maintenance: due to the surge in technological advancement, the demand and cost of technological gadgets for the implementation of the blended learning approach is on the high side. There is also the case of data cost and access. Many teachers and students may not be able to afford the cost of data for the online classes.
ii.   Technological dependence: blended learning is so dependent on reliable, current and easy to use technological devices. Thus, the blended learning strategy must be accompanied with sufficient technical support.
iii. Poor internet facilities: blended learning requires a functional internet facility. This is the major challenges impeding its adoption and implementation in most developing nations.

As evident in literature, blended learning boost students, teachers and peers connectedness/interactions, thereby ensuring effective learning (Kintu, Zhu & Kagambe, 2017). It enhances students' reading, speaking and writing skills, thereby improving their English communication and comprehension (Bijeikiene, Rasinskiene, & Zutkiens, 2011). Scholars have reiterated the benefits of teaching and learning of languages through the blended learning approach (Kintu, Zhu & Kagambe, 2017; Hong & Samimy, 2010). Hong and Samimy (2010) and Cartner (2009) had supported blended learning approach, affirming that it arouses students' attitude to learning and their technological experiences.

Studies have revealed that blended learning has a positive influence on students' performance (Bernard et al., 2014), cost-effectiveness (Twigg, 2003; Means et al., 2009; Graham, 2013), participation and motivation (Lopez-Perez, Perez-Lopez & Rodriguez-Ariza, 2011), increases access and flexibility to teaching and learning resources (Macedo-Rouet et al., 2009), promotes deep and active learning (Cooner, 2010) and more effective than the traditional learning approach (Sitzmann et al., 2006). As a result of the aforementioned, many universities have started adopting the blended learning approach in the delivery of instructions, especially in the management and business fields (Mitchell & Forer, 2010).

Factors accountable for encouraging or motivating teachers adoption of the blended learning approach include teachers': independent learning, interest, personalized learning, external expectation, improvement of skills, computer self-efficacy and social perception (Lu & Su, 2009); perceptions of usefulness, preparation time, professional support, funding, institutional infrastructure, efficacy, the point of need for technical support and the involvement of senior staff (Torrisi-Steele & Drew, 2013); absence of appropriate computer hardware and software (Surry, Ensminger & Jones, 2002).

The Major challenge in the execution of blended learning is the quality of the technological facilities on ground; where there is quality technological facilities for use, learning initiatives and objectives can be easily attained, and students learning satisfaction and motivation can be ensured (Kintu, Zhu & Kagambe, 2017; Osgerby, 2013). Similarly, language teachers need to be acquainted with technology-based learning platforms and environment (Hong & Samimy, 2010). Many language researchers opined that language teachers be exposed to computer assisted learning and be supported technologically by training and professional development programmes (Hong & Samimy, 2010). In line with Starkey (2010), teachers using blended learning should be knowledgeable in digital technology, applications and utilization.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the academic calendar of schools as well as the stability of education systems; principally in the regular teaching-learning transactions and advocacy is now on the way forward- the adoption of blended learning. Blended learning can foster students learning outcomes as well as teachers' effectiveness in teaching. In view of the multiple benefits of the blended learning approach as outlined above; the English language teachers and students must brace up and imbibe the approach.

Therefore, for a robust education system and structure amidst the COVID-19 pandemic or any other future pandemic, it is suggested that: schools (the upper basic, secondary and tertiary) adopt or adapt the blended learning approach in their teaching and learning processes; teachers and students at these levels, be professionally trained or retrained on the technicalities of the blended learning approach; schools be equipped with information and communication technology devices as well as the provision of appropriate learning environments and increased funding for the education sector, as these are means by which the blended learning approach can foster.

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