

Challenges of (English) Teacher Educators during Covid-19 Lockdown in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examines the challenges faced by teacher education during the Covid-19 lockdown in Nigeria. The study identifies and analyses the difficulties encountered by teacher education programmes and explores the impact of the lockdown on teaching and learning practices with special reference to the teaching of English language. The study, which is a qualitative one obtained its data from secondary sources like original research studies, government policies, books, newspapers, websites and the researcher's observations of events at this period. The paper identifies that the sudden shift to online teaching and learning posed significant technological and infrastructural challenges like limited access to devices and internet connectivity. Also, the absence of face-to-face interactions impacted the quality of teaching and learning experiences like the absence of physical classrooms, language laboratory facilities, and resources which restricted practical learning opportunities for English teacher education. Other challenges identified include limited professional development opportunities, challenges of adapting to online teaching and the overall impact of the pandemic on the mental well-being of both students and teachers.

Keywords: COVID-19, teacher education, teaching English, online teaching and learning

Introduction

Education plays significant roles in all societies. As a result, every nation strives to provide quality education for her citizens with a view to ensuring self-development. To achieve quality development and education, the issues of teacher education have to be properly handled, as teachers are the major drivers of the educational industry. Indeed, no nation can rise beyond the quality of her teachers (*National Policy of Education*, 2004).

Teacher Education refers to the policies, procedures and provisions designed to equip

prospective teachers with the necessary knowledge, attitudes, behaviors and skills they require to perform their tasks effectively in the classroom, school and wider community (Wikipedia, 2017). Allen, Rowan & Singh (2020) further stated that teacher education is the professional education of teachers towards attainment of attitudes, skills and knowledge desirable to make them effective and efficient in their work, in accordance with the need of a given society. It includes training before service (pre-service) and during service (in-service) or teacher development or capacity development.

Nigeria being a multilingual nation has at least 540 indigenous languages (NERDC survey, 2021). However, the English language is the predominant language of education and instruction as it is that which is officially recognized as the language of instruction from basic three to the higher education level (*Nigerian Language Policy*, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic emanated from Wuhan, China in December, 2019 and spread rapidly to different parts of the world. The Director General of the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of the pandemic on 30th January, 2020 as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC). By March 11, 2020 WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic- a pandemic occurs when a disease usually an epidemic that is spread over many countries or continents that people are not immune to spreads across large regions. Indisputably, it is highly contagious and deadly but not a death sentence (Madhav et. al., 2017). To prevent further spread of this pandemic, countries went on lockdown that negatively affected several aspects of human activities and of course, education was not spared. COVID-19 disrupted the normal educational system in most nations and resulted in closure of educational institutions.

According to the UNESCO (2020) report, the closure of educational institutions has impacted over 91% of the world's population. Indeed, this crisis affected educational plans especially, the 4th Sustainable Development Goal which aims at ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning

opportunities for all. Needless to say, it worsened global learning challenges and educational imbalance as the negative effects will be naturally on the poor.

In spite of the growth in the provision of education at all levels, COVID-19 is the greatest challenge that all education systems has faced in recent times. Face-to-face instruction for most learners was abruptly ended, and most schools had to change almost immediately, to remote (online) education even when teachers were not prepared for this. According to Global Partnership for Education (GPE, 2020), as at 25 March, 165 countries had closed all their schools because of the COVID-19 virus, which affected 63 million primary and secondary school teachers. English teachers and of course other teachers and teacher trainees, especially in Nigeria, faced among others, issues of inadequate funding, poor societal perception of teachers, low enrolment and insufficient knowledge and use of ICT in a globalizing world prior to COVID-19 period. The outbreak of COVID-19 has meant that changes that should have occurred over years had to be implemented in few days as a result of the lockdown. As schools moved to online teaching, the opportunity for pre-service English teachers to complete teaching practice exercise were impacted in some institutions and in-service trainings were affected.

The swift move to online learning (and without proper training) to keep students engaged in learning led to intensified workloads for English teachers as they work not only to load more teaching content and materials into the online space, but also

have to learn to use the relevant software. Indeed, GPE (2020) has rightly concluded that teachers are the back bone of education systems and key to reaching learning goals, regardless of context and situation. Within the COVID-19 crisis, they were on the frontline in ensuring that learning and assessment continued. This reiterates the importance of teachers and teacher education at all situations, times and contexts. In this paper, we identify challenges of teacher educators and by extension, those of English teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Response to Covid-19 pandemic issues by teacher training institutions in Nigeria

The first response is prevention of the spread of the pandemic among learners and teachers by creating awareness of the nature of COVID-19, its mode of transmission and signs of infection. At this stage also, institutions of learning were closed down. The second is to lessen the impact of the closure on learning through Remote Learning (RL) where students and teachers are not physically present in a regular classroom setting. During RL, information is sent through technology, such as discussion boards, video conferencing, television, radio, etc and online assessment. RL can occur synchronously or asynchronously. Synchronous learning involves real-time interaction, while asynchronous learning allows for self-paced learning and flexibility in accessing and completing course materials.

E-learning became the most preferred platform for learning during the COVID-19 pandemic period lockdown as a result of

restriction in movement and gathering. Amongst others, E- Learning enhances the efficiency of knowledge as both students and lecturers will have easy access to a large volume of information within the global village, allows students and lecturers to participate in class and in their comfort zone, provides a platform for students to interact with themselves with the discussion forum which eliminates the barriers to participation.

In the US, UK, South Korea and China among others, online university/teacher education has continued almost seamlessly as a result of the existence of needed facilities and personnel (Adepetu & Lawal, 2020). Several e-learning platforms have been adopted although these are inexhaustive, they include, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google hangout (meet), Skype, Bamboo Learning, Google Classroom, Docedo, WiZiq, Adobe Captivate, Elucidat, Blackboard Learn, Connectals, etc. Webinars were organized to ensure training of teachers and teacher trainers at this critical period. Institutions also tapped into global resources as The World Bank, UNESCO, and other developing partners rolled out a number of education resources.

In the Nigerian context, teacher education and higher education generally was also expected to continue during this period seamlessly. On April 2, the then Minister of Education, Mallam Adamu Adamu, met virtually with 237 vice chancellors, rectors and provosts of tertiary institutions and directed that lectures should continue online (Adepetun and Lawal, 2020). Furthermore, the Federal Ministry of Education (FMOE)

released a document tagged-‘Education Coordinated COVID-19 Response Strategy’ which amongst others is to ensure:

- lessons delivery, assessments and learning continue remotely during the period of the pandemic without putting the health and safety of learners, teachers and education managers at risk;

- accelerated recovery and restoration of the education sector as well as quick regaining of the systems’ pre-pandemic capacity for education provision;

- a seamless reintegration of learners at all levels into the conventional system post-pandemic; a quick normalization of the system and timely closing of gaps in the education cycle as a result of unscheduled long shut-down of schools;

- lessons and capacity developed from response to COVID-19 are institutionalised and deployed for building and strengthening resilience of education system in delivering quality manpower training and human capital development for sustainable national development.

The FMOE document on reopening of schools after the pandemic also admonished teachers to stay home and learn safely to get involved in online teaching that not only prepares them to teach in a way that safeguards health, safety, and security of learners, but also enables them to facilitate learning using twenty-first century pedagogy based on ICT. Teachers were expected to provide learners with online learning, radio or TV programs at this period.

To ensure this objective was attained, tertiary institutions which include teacher training ones were expected to be financed by Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFUND), National Teachers’ Institute (NTI), Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) while assistance is also expected to be sought from international development partners, donors, teachers’ unions, private organizations and internet providers. While some higher institutions and many private universities carried on with academic activities and conducted examinations in some cases; it may not be wrong to say, many government owned higher/teacher training institutions could not meet up to expectations.

As expected, the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) as an Open and Distance Learning Institution (ODL) which allows learning at a distance, ensured learning took place through online facilitation sessions like: Video conferencing sessions, discussion forums, chat sessions (NOUN 2020). The fact remains that the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted gaps in school-based learning scheme and preparedness for emergencies within Nigerian educational sector. This plan is essential to ensure learning continuity during time of crisis.

Despite the release of a COVID-19 Contingency plan (FMoE) which is highly detailed on keeping schools safe during the pandemic and counselling/providing information to students on preventive measures to curb the spread and also ensuring continuity of learning despite the challenge, the white paper was not

effectively been put in practice for obvious reasons. While the effort of the Federal and State governments on the path of health and in providing financial packages and palliatives must be commended, improper handling of the educational sector is uncalled for.

The third response to COVID-19 pandemic by educational institutions is effective 'Back to Campus' plans after lockdown to ensure effective safe return to quality learning of learners, teachers and others in the environment.

Part of the measures advocated include as seen in FMoE document (in conjunction with Federal Ministry of Health, Nigeria Centre for Disease Control & Nigeria Education in Emergencies Working Group) entitled 'Guidelines for Schools & Learning Facilities Reopening after COVID-19 Pandemic Closures' are: compulsory wearing of face masks; Proper decontamination and regular sanitation of premises. Provision of WASH facilities-water; sanitation & hygiene, Provision of body disinfectants at all entering points to major facilities like gates; hostels and offices; Use of temperature scanners ensuring social& physical distancing during lectures and eating places through dual method teaching strategies (conventional-for small classes & online teaching –for large classes)

Others are, preparation of lecture timetable to accommodate staggered lectures to prevent overpopulation in lecture halls etc.; outdoor learning; to ensure safe distancing between learners and teachers; the use of shelter outdoors for protection and safety;

staggered attendance: learners may arrive and depart at different times to avoid overcrowding. Schools may reopen gradually (starting with particular grade levels); alternate attendance: schools may alternate attendance days per week e.g. part 1 on Monday and Tuesday and part 2 on Wednesday etc; Platooning: classes may be divided into morning and afternoon shifts.

Also advocated were: Creative delivery: use of various media for distance learning-printed materials, online, TV and radio programs; recruitment of additional teachers and education personnel to guarantee prescribed safe distancing teacher-learner ratio; establishment of adequately equipped dispensaries and clinics as appropriate; provision of better ventilated classrooms and Temporary Learning Centres (TLCS); creation of immediate temporary isolation space; sensitization, training, and building capacity for teachers, administrators and other education personnel for effective use and complying with School COVID-19 Referral System and Protocols for safe distancing and hygiene in schools.

For higher education, finance was expected to come from National Universities Commission, National Teachers Institute, National Education Research Development Council, and the Federal Ministry of Education et cetera and to obtain support from Parent Teachers Associations (PTAs), international development partners and donors amongst others. The guideline finally submits that safe reopening entails sufficient provisions, including infrastructure, equipment, facilities, supplies and expertise

and this entails preparedness and adequate capacity.

Challenges

Unexpectedly, the new normal situation has added some challenges to events and happenings in our teacher education/educational institutions. Allen, Jerim and Sims (2020) summarise the challenges of COVID-19 globally by stating that, the pandemic has led to loss of loved ones struck down by the virus, those without work or at the risk of being so, found stranded in countries far from home with borders closed, separated from families and friends, and who are suffering loss and anxiety. Moreover, the fragility of life has become powerfully evident to us all. In others, particularly many schools, the move to the online space is presenting considerable hardship as teachers struggle to adapt to what might well be the “new normal” for quite a period.

The pandemic has disrupted the lives of students in different ways. Many were unsure of when they could likely complete their programmes. Thus, creating anxiety in them. Many students would drop out of school as a result of the unexpected lengthy period of the holiday. English teacher trainees in particular did not have access to using language laboratories and other resources that could assist in the development of the language skills-listening, speaking, reading and writing.

COVID-19 Pandemic, has further heightened the issues of educational inequity, prior to the pandemic efforts have been geared towards addressing educational

inequity and ensure that children everywhere are learning. One of such is the inclusive educational programs- in line with global trends, private schools in the country have adopted a virtual learning model(GPE,2020).

Indeed, Bill Gates’ (2020) words summarize this fact as he states that- “The disease is both a symptom and cause of inequity. Today, it is COVID-19; tomorrow, it could be another pandemic, but in all, they are all fuelling the inequity gap”.

Happenings in Nigeria as captured by Adepetun and Lawal (2020) are: E-Learning flopped in some public universities/teacher training institutions because, successive governments failed to invest in technologies due to underfunding and lack of support to infrastructures, issues of ineffective power supply and poor network connectivity. Others are lack of flexibility in governance and inadequate training of personnel (academic and non-teaching) to make a switch to online teaching at a short notice. E- learning although not impossible was not feasible in the short run because the system had been configured to deliver in-person lectures.

Aside from the above-mentioned factors, some students appear not to see the need to use their phones beyond social media activities. Incessant strikes of unions play a key role for the set back of public academic institutions’ activities during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria as members complied with the directives of their unions.

A major hurdle to e-learning in some institutions is some lecturers’ apathy to

innovation, negative attitude to the trend, insensitivity to the plight of learners, coupled with the desire to make extra fund from the exercise as well as lack of clear understanding of copyright issues with regards to prepared online materials.

The restrictions brought on by COVID-19 also led to job losses. Most teachers working in private schools were not paid salaries because they worked at private schools that typically survive from fees they receive from poor parents mostly on daily, weekly or monthly basis. Some teacher trainees undergoing part time programmes could not get involved in remote learning due to non-payment of salaries and job insecurity. Consequently, they found it difficult to key into e-learning when made available.

Way Forward

The challenging period further exposed the rot in the Nigerian education system/teacher education and the lack of preparedness for emergencies. To address the situation some suggested as presented.

Government should ensure more financial resources in Nigeria's educational sector so that its institutions can compete globally and be ready for emergencies-English teachers and trainees especially need to be provided resources like language laboratories, libraries stocked with a variety of relevant books and reference materials, writing centres, virtual classrooms, professional development workshops etc. Effective training and retraining of teacher trainees and teachers on new technologies is imperative. Institutions should lay emphasis on facilities for online teaching and other

multimedia resources. Adequate professional support and training including socio-emotional supports should be provided as closures due to COVID-19 was sudden and it had a toll on teachers and teacher trainees. It should be noted that, the period of emergency is not the time to put into effect cumbersome methods. Also, there is no dishonour in teaching through a good material prepared by others and so, teachers may utilize high quality learning materials available freely in form of open educational resources. It should be pointed out that, crisis often provides opportunities for positive change and so, teachers should leverage on the experience garnered at this period.

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