

COVID-19 PANDEMIC: INNOVATIONS AND CHALLENGES IN FRENCH LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Faith Lori

Department of French
College of Education, Warri

Abstract

This research work titled COVID-19: innovations and challenges in French language education, tends to examine Covid-19 which has ravaged the whole world since its arrival. As a matter of fact, no meaningful activity can take place in such a situation which has to do with lives of human beings. This study examined the origin of Covid-19. It also examined French language education in Nigeria. This has also included the history of French language in Nigeria educational system as well as its teaching and learning in Nigeria. This study equally examined some of the innovations occasioned by Covid-19 especially the online teaching and learning which has now been introduced in the educational system globally. Also examined are some challenges caused by this global pandemic. The challenges identified have greatly affected the educational system. A good example of it was the poor performance in the Unified Matriculation Tertiary Examination (UTME) organized by the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) in 2020. The performance was so bad that for the first time cut-off marks into the University was reduced to as low as 120 for some state owned Universities. This study concluded that there was no equal learning in online classes which is one of the innovations resulting from the pandemic. This study concluded by making some recommendations among others that the government should as a matter of urgency provide and equip with modern digital facilities.

KEY WORDS: *Covid-19, French, language, education, innovation and challenge.*

Introduction

Education which is the bedrock of any society or nation is among one of the sectors with devastating impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Since its origin in the world, that is 2019, the educational system all over the world has witnessed some innovations as well as some challenges. This is not limited to Africa as well as Nigeria. According to Alabi (2021): "Education is among the sectors with devastating impact of Covid-19 pandemic, before the pandemic, the Nigerian education system has adopted purely, face-to-face approach to teaching and learning in primary and secondary schools. They were not allowed to own any digital gadgets such as phone, computer, neither were they allowed to be seen with such in the school".

When the pandemic started, it led to total lockdown in the whole world in 2020. In Nigeria, the total lockdown started from March 30th 2020 till May 2020. All schools public and private cut across all level ranging from primary, secondary and tertiary institutions. This total lockdown was a measure put in place to prevent or curtail the spread of the disease. According to Mohammed (2021): "The virus was so contagious and deadly that it led to the closure of major cities all over the world to curtail its spread. ...this closure opens up the use of online\virtual teaching and learning. Some countries are already used to online or virtual teaching while some are still at the incubation stage. Nigeria for example was not adequately prepared for online\virtual teaching".

The emergence and spread of Covid-19 pandemic has altered societal norms to become what is now known to be the new normal. The global outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has spread worldwide, affecting almost all countries and territories. The outbreak was first identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. The countries around the world cautioned the public to take responsive care. The public care strategies have included hand washing, wearing face masks, physical distancing and avoiding mass gathering and assemblies. Lockdown and staying at home strategies have been put in place as the needed action to flatten the curve and control the transmission of the disease (Sintema 2020).

The pandemic apart from the education sector, also affected socio-economic activities all over the world. It has left an indelible mark on every area of social life and greatly affected every civilization of the world with Nigeria inclusive. During the Covid-19 peak, language education faced some challenges. It is also interesting to note that there are some innovations today due to the corona virus pandemic.

The Concept COVID -19

COVID-19 is a virus which was discovered in Wuhan City in China, As a matter of fact this virus originated from China in December, 2019. It is actually called “Corona Virus” and code named “COVID -19”. The “co” stands for Corona, the “VI” for Virus, and the “D” for disease. According to Jagboro 2021: “Corona Virus disease (Covid-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered Corona Virus known as the severe acute respiratory syndrome corona virus 2 (SARS-COV-2). The first human cases of COVID-19 were identified in Wuhan City, China in December 2019.

The global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to death of millions of people across the world. Continents most hit are America, Europe and Asia. Its effects are devastating. It actually brought the World to a standstill which has today led to the new normal. This dreaded disease has taken the lives of old and young. Health workers are mostly at high risk in contacting this highly contagious disease. Fatima (2021): opined that “COVID-19 is a Virus that originated from Wuhan, China in 2019. The Virus spread rapidly and was declared a pandemic in 2020. The Virus was so contagious and deadly that it led to the closure of major cities all over the World to curtail its spread. During the closure, Schools all over the World were close”. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared corona virus a pandemic in March, 2020. This was to reduce and further curtail the spread of the disease, as the highly contagious disease was actually spreading fast and killing millions of people.

French Language Education

French Language is the world second language after English. It is the second working language of United Nations. In Africa, it is the dominant language. So also in West Africa Sub- Region French has ten colonies i.e there is ten francophone countries in West Africa which include; Togo, Benin Republic, Mali, Senegal, Cote d’ Ivoire, Guinea , Burkina Faso, Chad, Niger and Mauritania. While there are only five English speaking countries as well as one Portuguese speaking Country.

Nigeria is all surrounded by French speaking countries, for the geographical location of Nigeria the relevance of French in the World, French Language was introduced into Nigeria educational system since the colonial era. French language became more popular in Nigeria after independence otherwise known as post-colonial period.

One of the many reasons the French language is being taught in Nigeria is due to its proximity to four neighbouring francophone countries. Nigeria has boosted its international,

cultural, economic and political relations with countries like the republic of Benin, Cote d' Ivoire, Cameroun, Chad, Niger, and France as a European country by adopting the French language as its second official language. The teaching and learning of French language in Nigeria has been progressive (Damilung2021).

The teaching and learning of French in Nigeria has been trying to be popular in Nigeria Educational system despite its poor enrollment in the West Africa School Certificate Examination. The few Nigerians who have studied French up to tertiary level, have enjoyed the language improvement opportunities through the mandatory immersion programme during 300level (year three) for University undergraduates and NCE II(year two) after second semester for undergraduates of Nigeria Colleges of Education. The students usually go to the Nigeria French language village, Badagry Lagos for a whole academic session (six months) for University undergraduates, while (12 twelve weeks) for College of Education undergraduates. The students also have the choice of going to neighbouring Countries such as; Togo, Republic of Benin, Niger e.t.c. The students to some extent are usually integrated in the Francophone culture.

Teachers of French language are not left out, as some have also enjoyed the benefits of attending trainings and workshops in these French speaking Countries and even France in the past. Although there established training centres in Nigeria such as the centre for French Training and Documentation (CFTD). In Nigeria there are three of such centres. They are located in Enugu, Ibadan and Jos. Teachers of French in the colleges of Education often go to these centres for workshops in the last ten years.

Teaching/Learning (French Language) in COVID-19 era

Corona Virus code named COVID-19 no doubt has brought some innovation into the educational system. These practices were not in the Educational system before now. It is evident the COVID-19 led to the innovations.

Online classes was introduced during COVID-19. There was online classes from primary to tertiary level. The Nigeria French language village was not left out of this different lecturer had online classes with the students on language immersion programme. This innovation greatly assisted the students in retaining the already acquired competence in French they had and as well improve their competence in French. Online teaching/learning is one of the greatest innovations occasioned by COVID-19 pandemic. According to Dhawan (2020): "Online/ Virtual education is a student- centered method of learning that offers a great deal of flexibility in terms of time and location".

The Online classes are made possible through digital learning such as the computers, mobile phones, television sets as well as radio sets. The mobile phones or Ipads must be connected to network as well as the computers. As opined by Mohammed (2021): "the COVID-19 pandemic has made many academic institutions, proprietors, state and federal government resort to online teaching so as to not further hamper the learning process... There was broadcast of school subjects on radio station and televisions, there are also Apps such as (U-lesson) that are also used to teach and learn. The online classes so much assisted students who were to take certificate class examination such as, First School Leaving Certificate for the primary six classes. The Basic Examination for the junior secondary school (JSS 3) and the senior secondary examination (SS3).

The use of online/virtual learning is a great method of teaching during any disaster or pandemic. It is a way of ensuring continued learning without learners losing out on their

academic calendar. If implemented appropriately, learners will achieve a lot and still cope with the school closure (Mohammed 2021).

The use of on line platforms for online\virtual teaching\learning is a very good one and a welcomed development in our society today. Platforms such as; Whatsapp, Telegram, Messenger, Google classroom, Zoom etc. are explored and used for the teaching\learning of French for the first time. These platforms also promote additional resources and coaching to the learners. These digital technologies such as the virtual learning environment; social media and other group forums have greatly enhanced teaching and learning.

During the lockdown, lecturers in the Department of French, College of Education Warri, introduced online teaching for the students. This was done through smart phones with the use of online platforms, such as Whatsapp and Messenger. The lecturers of the department were actively collaborating with one another to improve online teaching method. In this Covid-19 era, teachers or lecturers as the case may be, are obliged to develop creative initiatives that assist to overcome the limitations of virtual\online teaching\learning.

Many educational organization are offering their tools and solution for free to help and support teaching\learning in a more interactive and engaging environment. On this, learning has provided the opportunity to teach and learn in innovative ways unlike the teaching\learning experienced in the normal classroom setting. (Dawulung & Enikarikiselu 2021).

Today, people are beign framed through online classes for international examination for French, these include TOEFL, DELF and DALF. Teachers who do these training now do it more online. That is to say that one can now learn French language from the comfort of your home.

The use of lexical innovations is not left out as coinage of words such as “CORONA”, “COVID-19” were invented and used globally from the origin of the virus till date. This new lexical innovation is a development of language. The use of such expressions on the social media has led to their widespread usage, and this has led to lexical innovations. According to Sanni and Wakili (2021): “The use of such expressions especially by women in homes, businesses, religious gatherings, schools and other occasions for communicative tasks has impacted in one way or the other--- messages on social media are life with expressions meant to educate the masses on how to prevent and manage the spread of Corona Virus”.

Challenges

The challenges of teaching /learning in COVID-19 era cannot be underestimated. The negative impact it has caused has given a great concern especially in the educational sector. To begin with it has disrupted the academic calendar from Primary to the Tertiary level of education.

This has really put the teaching/ learning french at risk, being a foreign language. some of the challenges due to COVID-19 pandemic include: Closure of schools, poor school enrollment, unequal access to education opportunities as well as poor learning.

The closure of schools interrupted international, national, regional and state examinations. The international examinations affected by COVID-19 include the TOEFL taken by those who wish to go Canada especially to live and work. Another international examination affected by COVID -19 as it affects French language is the DELF and DALF taken by those wish to acquire the knowledge of French in different purposes. The regional examination affected by it is the West Africa School Certificate Examination taken by those in the final

year of Senior Secondary School. The private candidates of the last two examinations were not left out, as they were also prevented from taking the examination due to COVID-19. The Basic Certificate Examination taken by students in the Junior Secondary School was equally affected by the pandemic as well as the primary school leaving certificate examination which was also left out. Again, the unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) also known as JAMB was also affected by the pandemic. It is evident that the pandemic grossly impacted negatively on the educational sector.

The medium and low income learners were more affected by the pandemic due to lack of access to digital technologies such as smart phones, Ipad and computers. Zar, Dawn, Fischer and castro-Rodriquez (2020): posited that “the pandemic indirectly affected the low and medium-income countries, disrupting schooling and lack of access to school”. In Nigeria, the impact of the pandemic on education exposed how ill-equipped the government schools are. Learners were left idle for most of the months. Later into the lock- down on line classes were organized through radio and television (Mohammed 2021).

Those living in the rural areas were directly affected by the later. This is because they don't have access to these digital technologies. Some don't even have access to electricity especially those living in the riverine area. The factor of electricity failure cannot be ruled out generally as those even in the Urban areas are greatly affected by this. Only those above average can regularly provide power for themselves because they can regularly afford to buy petrol or diesel to power their generators or plants.

The use of these digital technologies especially the smart phones, can expose the learners to the ills on the social media. That is to say that it can have bad influence on the learners, as some of them will take advantage of it to get themselves involved in the vices on social media. Instead of using the smart phones positively they end up using it negatively. Today the effect of the negative use of smart phones is evident in our society. It has led to many evil deeds and atrocities which include the yahoo fraud, the yahoo plus which involves ritual killings as well as missing and sudden disappearance of persons being killed by human parts dealers. One could even say that the use of smart phones have brought more evil to our society. On this specifically, the learners especially the children, teenagers and the young youths need maximum supervision and guidance, this is especially from the parents and other family members.

The issue of reliable internet connection is not left out, as it poses difficulty to learners. That is to say the network system has to be stable for the flow of on-line classes. In all of these, Murgatrod (2020): broadly identified challenges with e-learning as “accessibility, affordability, flexibility, learning and educational policy”.

In the case of students studying French were to go for language immersion programme (LIP) which is compulsory for 300level University undergraduates and year 2 NCE undergraduates every year, that the year 2020 was like a set back to them due to the pandemic. In the history of Nigerian French language village at Badagry in Lagos State; their academic calendar which has been constant every year was distorted. This greatly affected their academic calendar Lori (2021).

Conclusion

This study on COVID-19: Innovations and challenges in French language education has been able to examine the innovations brought about in the educational system due to COVID-19 pandemic. It also went further to examine the challenges occasioned by the pandemic. It has been able to identify some of the challenges in the educational system resulting from the

COVID-19 pandemic. The conclusion drawn from this is that there is no equal learning in the use of digital technologies. Therefore for equal learning to take place in our society a lot need to be done on the part of the government especially.

Recommendations

- Adequate electricity supply should be provided by the government.
- The Government should as a matter of urgency provide and equip schools with modern digital facilities.
- Adequate and proper trainings should be organized for teachers across all level of education.
- The Government should ensure that policies and guidelines are implemented in schools as stated in the National Policy on Education. (NPE), The National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) guides lines are adhered to as well as the National Universities Commission (NUC) guidelines.

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