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MULTIMEDIA LANGUAGE LABORATORY AND LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING IN OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *This paper takes a retrospective look at language teaching and learning in open and distance education with specific reference to the role of the multimedia language laboratory in language education offered in the National Open University of Nigeria. This paper hopes to ginger more research interest and academic discourse in this area. The language laboratory is an indispensable input for effective language teaching and learning and developments in information and communications technology have made it possible to deploy this resource effectively in open and distance education. This paper uses a hybrid methodology to analyse the relationship between the language laboratory and language education through distance learning. The analysis focuses on the core technology involved, the language skills to be developed, learning activities that the laboratory would enable the educator to explore. The paper also outlines implications for present-day language teaching in open and distance learning.*

KEYWORDS: Multimedia Language Laboratory, Open & Distance Education, NOUN

INTRODUCTION

Distance education is defined as an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner. While open learning refers to an organised educational activity, based on the use of teaching materials, in which constraints on study are minimised in terms of access, time and place, pace, method of study, or any combination of these (Kvaternik, Perraton, Robinson, & Creed, 2001). For the purposes of this paper, the umbrella term distance and open learning is used to encompass all of these.

The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) is used for reference because it has technology that is compatible with the multimedia language laboratory. The aim of open and distance education in Nigeria is summarized in the mission statement of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) which is to provide functional cost effective, flexible learning which adds life-long value to quality education for all who seek knowledge (NOUN, 2018).

The National Universities Commission (NUC) through its Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS) states that a faculty of education in universities should be able to:

1. produce prospective teachers with proper leadership qualities
2. produce teachers with the knowledge, skills and attitudes which will enable them to contribute to the growth and development of their communities in particular and their nation in general
3. produce teachers who have sound mastery of their subject areas and the ability to impart such knowledge to their students

4. equip teachers with a mastery of problem-solving skills
5. produce highly motivated, conscientious and efficient classroom teachers for all levels of our educational system.
6. help teachers to fit into the social life of the community and society at large and enhance their commitment to national objectives
7. provide teachers with the intellectual and professional background, adequate for their alignment and to make them adaptable to any changing situation, not only in the life of their country but in the wide world.
8. encourage the spirit of enquiry, creativity and entrepreneurship in teachers.
9. enhance teachers' commitment to the teaching profession.
10. enhance the skills of teacher's in the use of new technologies (NUC, 2007:6)

NOUN creates subject specific aims that guide strategies designed to meet the BMAS standards. For example, the English methods course aims to give students an overview of the theories, approaches and methods in teaching English as a second language. The course exposes students to the methods and techniques of teaching language skills and sub-skills as well as the techniques of constructing language test items, scheme of work and lesson plans (Okonkwo, 2018).

In the bid to enhance the teacher's skill in the use of new technologies, institutions ensure that they have instructional facilities that will enhance teaching and teacher quality such as the language laboratory. The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2001) describes a language laboratory as a room in an institution where you can learn to speak a foreign language by listening to tapes and recording your voice.

In addition, Stone (1991) gives a functional classification of language laboratories summarized as follows. The reading laboratory is meant to increase vocabulary reading comprehension and reading speed. While the listening laboratory is used to improve pronunciation and listening comprehension. The Computer Laboratory uses technology to develop reading, vocabulary and grammar control as well as offers word processing, e-mail and internet access and experience in various software applications.

With increasing sophistication of technology and access to its components, a fourth type language laboratory emerged, and this is called the Hybrid or multimedia language laboratory (MLL). It performs all the functions of the aforementioned laboratories and offers more interactivity. For the purposes of this paper, the term multimedia language laboratory (MLL) suffices.

As per standards, the NUC recognises that the language laboratory aids in the training of quality teachers of language thus, having a well-furnished language laboratory that must be capable seating at least 30 students are considered as an important minimum facility requirement for accrediting the undergraduate English language teacher degree.

In addition, Salaberry, (2001) citing Anderson (1964) argues that the key aim of a language laboratory is to provide a learning experience that produces unhesitating, automatic oral responses with little or no reliance on analytical support. Thus, the MLL is one of the many

critical facilities required to achieve the objectives of language teacher education in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions such as NOUN.

Although, the policies have very lofty objectives and universities try to implement based on standards, several studies revealed that the English language teaching situation in the lower rungs of education is pathetic suggesting that there are systemic challenges in teacher training institutions that require attention.

The World Bank Country report of 2003 made some clear revelations that relevant to the focus of this paper because, the same issues are still with us today as follows.

On teacher qualifications it was discovered that around 50% of teachers of English Language in the primary schools were unqualified in subject expertise. Teachers were noted to have a narrow repertoire of pedagogical skills in areas such as Nigerian language learning, literacy, and teaching through the medium of English in upper primary (World Bank, 2003)

On language use in the teaching learning process, research suggests that the language policy is not well implemented or supported causing teachers of early primary classes to use unstructured mix of English and a Nigerian language in the classroom (Gagnet, 2003, Teboho, 2000)

At another level, Moja (2000) and Teboho (2000) conducted separate analysis that revealed that teachers' access to new technologies is virtually non-existent while in-service education and training of teachers need to be reviewed because participants were mostly after the allowances not the knowledge which was in itself inadequately presented.

Furthermore, the World Bank 2002 project appraisal for the Universal Basic Education (UBE) stressed the need for school and teacher development through in-service training and mentoring programmes adequately supported by local demand driven teachers' workshops and in-service training. However, the report emphasised that the focus should be on links between language of instruction, learning and literacy and would need to be supported by availability of appropriate teaching and learning resources such as the MLL.

Adamu (2004) posits that the federal government of Nigeria through the Nigerian National Policy for Information Technology (IT) in 2001 has demonstrated commitment for Technology-Mediated Open and Distance Education (Tech-MODE). This policy strategy targets establishing facilities for electronic distance learning network and ensure effective Internet connectivity, which will provide opportunities for educationally disadvantaged areas to educationally leapfrog into the modern era.

The Nigerian IT policy allots a crucial role to the educational sector in the development and implementation of Tech-MODE projects thus, some projects were developed in this area to provide a strong basis for Tech-MODE implementation and these include: National Virtual Library Project, Education Management Information System Program, National Open University of Nigeria and Distance Learning Programs, Computer in Schools Initiative, Nigerian University Network, and National Teachers Institute Teacher Training Program by Distance Learning(Adekunle, Ayanwale, Adekunle, & Ubaru, 2008).

Following these, there is the need to do a retrospective review of the role of the MLL in language teacher education as provided by Noun through ODL. This may enable us to ascertain

how ODL institutions can profitably exploit the affordances of increased technological sophistication as well as the implications therein today. The methodology will be presented first because it encompasses the philosophy underpinning the focus of the paper. Thereafter, the paper would look at the application of the relationship from three perspectives: the core technology involved, language skills development and the classroom activities this technology would assist.

INTERNAL DOCUMENT REVIEW

The Core Technology Involved.

As outlined in the introduction, the hybrid or multimedia language laboratory is the focus of this retrospective analysis. The specific MLL described below was installed at the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) College of Education, Zuba Abuja in 2004. It could be made to suite any climatic condition and had the following configuration and functional layout Ofemile, 2005; Abdulkadir, 2004).

Electro-audio console This comprised of audio selection device, cubicles, class control unit, satellite reception device and other support gadgets. They are briefly outlined below.

Audio selection device: This device enables the teacher to interact verbally with individual students or group of students while others are engaged in other activities or even with the whole class just as they can be switched off.

Control of cubicles, sections or sectors: This console allows for division of the class into 2 - 9 groups for separate activities without interference. Two lecturers can teach separate lessons without audio interference.

Tape Recorder/Player: This uses cassette tapes allows for mass recording of master tape from the console. A student can play his/her cassette or tapes without disturbing others.

Class control; The lecturer can pay attention to individual students when they use the **Attention Device.** The students will only need to press a button to get the teacher's attention, as the student's cubicle or group or position would be highlighted on the console. Each student cubicle has a **mounted mirror** which enables the student to do a self-assessment of their use of vocal organs for phonemic articulation during lessons. In addition**, microphone and headsets** are available in each cubicle or console for active participation in lessons

The MLL has a **satellite reception device** on CK_U band to pick broadcasts via satellite from foreign stations and the broadcasts from the distance learning institution is integrated into the set. There are computers with scanners, Compact Disk (CD) and DVD writers and printers as well as paper printers in the laboratory.

There are other support gadgets that make the laboratory provide enhanced multimedia interaction such as a multimedia video projector, video, internet, multiple-camera systems (stand-alone camera to cover the whole class and web-camera for each computer to cover individual users); overhead projectors and Video Home System (VHS) player and recorder.

As technology is becoming a bigger feature in the classroom especially with the advent of web

2.0, the MLL has computers that combine with other technologies to provide audio, video, modems, mobile phone lines, wireless connection (Wi-Fi and Bluetooth) and satellite dish connectivity during lessons. Web 2.0 is an umbrella term first proposed in 2004 and later articulated to mean "a set of economic social, and technological trends that collectively form the basis for the next generation of the Internet—a more mature, distinctive medium characterized by user participation, openness, and network effects" (Musser & O'Reilly, 2006:7). This implies that users can engage with information and technology as well as other participants nearby, face-to-face or remote.

At the level of service provision, Ofemile (2005) and Abdulkadir (2004) agree that the MLL provides unlimited opportunities language teaching and learning because it had the following critical affordances.

Information Retrieval: Information from databases, reference materials and dictionaries are accessible to users for research and language learning purposes. Most information now come on Compact-Disk Read Only Memory (CD-ROMS). The CD-ROM player attached to the computer or maybe inbuilt enables the student to retrieve all kinds of data. By using a modem, Wi-Fi, Bluetooth connection learners can retrieve information from another computer or database.

Interactive Audio: The computer in the laboratory can be used to teach and test active listening skills especially with a computer-controlled tape recorder or CD-ROM drive, interactive audio lessons are possible. Visual information or actions added via an authoring programme appear on the computer screen and enhance learning. CD-ROMs greatly increase the use of audio lessons in an interactive environment.

Interactive Video: When a computer is used to control a linear video (VHS) player or a laser videodisc player, an interactive environment is created for learning. Access to segments is faster and the written material is provided on the screen.

Local Area Network (LAN): In a classroom laboratory or school, students can share the same software and accessories like Printers or Scanners etc. software is shared via a server. These enable teachers and learners to interact with each other in real time and to conduct collaborative activities in the target language.

Long Distance Networks or Wide Area Networks (WAN)

With effective telecommunication software, users of the language laboratory can use computers to communicate with others in other parts of the world using the Internet. This enables learners to communicate directly and in different languages. In essence, the MLL doubles as a virtual library.

Satellite Broadcasts: These can be captured using satellite dishes and transferred right into the classroom. These broadcasts can be videotaped for later classroom viewing and computers can be accessed to generate characters providing sub titles in English or in the target languages for these programmes.

A combination of interactive audio, video and text is hypermedia delivered through a combination of LAN, WAN and satellite broadcasts that allows users to engage effortlessly with all of these at the same time. This is further enhanced by Web 2.0's ability to harness the

power of crowds and collaboration in learning. Musser and O'Reilly described this development thus: "Web 2.0 thrives on network effects: databases that get richer the more people interact with them, applications that are smarter the more people use them, marketing that is driven by user stories and experiences, and applications that interact with each other to form a broader computing platform" (Musser & O'Reilly, 2006:7). It is the position of this paper that what is true for marketing is true for language teacher education thus, Web 2.0 enhances the MML and makes language education smarter, and people oriented.

Hybrid Methodology

This paper retrospectively reviews the role of the MLL in language education in ODL in 2005 and the implications for today. The approach to data management is a hybrid form of interpretivism. Interpretivism refers to the approaches which emphasise the meaningful nature of people's character and participation in both social and cultural life (Chowdhury, 2014). Research methodology in interpretivism adopts the position that people's knowledge of reality is a social construction by human actors, and so it distinctively rules out the methods of natural science (Chowdhury, 2014; Goldkuhl, 2012).

Furthermore, interpretivism holds that research knowledge is an understanding developed through processes of interpretation. The hybrid nature of the approach adopted in this paper is embedded in the character of knowledge as outlined in Goldkuhl (2012). Knowledge character within pragmatism is primarily focused on explanations (key form of positivism), understanding (key form of interpretivism), prescriptive (giving guidelines), normative (exhibiting values), prospective (suggesting possibilities), descriptive and explanatory knowledge. These different knowledge forms represent constructive knowledge emerging from the hybrid methodology

Data is collected from observation, literature reviewed around internal document review and industry review (Kelliher, 2005). Qualitative data sources include observation and participant observation (fieldwork) which in this paper is given by the author's active participation in the building, installation and running the MLL. Internal document in this paper refers to the 2005 conference paper thus literature review will only be upgraded to reflect present day situation without losing the original focus.

Resulting Knowledge Iteration

The Language Laboratory and Language Skills Development

The four language skills are speaking, reading writing and listening. One basic consideration in setting up an MLL is to decide which technological medium would be most appropriate for the language skills to be developed at a particular time. This is necessary for two reasons. The laboratory is by nature computer aided, and some technologies are more suitable to the acquisition of certain language skills than others as outlined below.

Computers and networks: Computer-assisted instructional programmes aid reading and writing skills in the target language. Individual students or groups of students in a classroom or laboratory can use this and communication between different groups is done in real time. The responses would be read, and replies given in writing. They would be aided with basic word processing programmes.

Interactive Audio: The digital audio capability in the laboratory with personal computer, microphone for input, and headphone for output makes it a micro media unit. With CD-ROMS and hook-up special recorders and radio receivers, interactive audio provides facilities to teach and test active listening skills.

Video/Animation: this is the visual component which is very useful for training in cultural and paralinguistic information. And this is added to the oral/aural components of other technologies. Video is useful in developing listening skills and creating cultural awareness. Video with subtitles can enhance reading skills. Video enables students to observe the dress, food, climate and gestures of the target culture.

Interactive Video: When the video is compressed onto a disc for use on a computer with instant access of sound, vision, and text an interactive system is produced. This system can provide adequate practice in all the language skills. Speaking, reading, listening, and writing skills, are greatly enhanced in student especially when the programme provides for student input. Cultural aspects are also highlighted.

The Language Laboratory and Pedagogy

The MLL enables the teacher to use traditional exercises to provide for the development of the language skills in an enhanced way. These exercises outlined below are adapted from Harmer, (2007), the Teaching Knowledge Test (TKT) Content and Language Integrated Learning(CLIL) handbook for teachers TKT-CLIL Essentials. (University of Cambridge, 2009) and the researcher's over fifteen (15) years teaching experience.

Speaking: Activities include dialogues, debates, soliloquies, monologues, are effectively used in developing speaking skills. An interactive audio programme allows learners to create dialogues, monologues, and soliloquies to practice them either with other students or alone. Students can be made to repeat sentences, words or phonemes by such programmes. In addition, the MLL gives room for students to listen and repeat words with instant feedback; use substitution drills to develop speaking skills and speaking in a variety of ways (Harmer, 2007) particularly where they have very good live models afforded by the internet.

Listening: The pedagogical use of radio benefitted from the earlier use of the phonograph for delivering distance learning (Salaberry, 2001). Following this, this paper argues that the MLL housing audiotapes, videotapes, and interactive digital videodisc (DVD) can provide very good listening guide for students and supply any language classroom with stimulating learning activities. Thus, students might be made to listen for main ideas, gist, just a segment, or for a specific fact in a programme or even jigsaw listening activities (Harmer, 2007) presented via the MLL. This ties into research indicating that a computer programme used in listening comprehension is a powerful tool for promoting second language acquisition (Grezel & Sciarone, 1994).

Reading: Reading skills can be substantially developed using the MLL. Salaberry, (2001). Word level reading skills (word recognition) are sharpened by activities such as cloze activities (e.g. every nth word of a text can be selected), anagrams, jumbled words, puzzles etc, which can be found in many computer-aided programmes, can be used to develop reading skills (Harmer, 2007; University of Cambridge, 2009). Activities may also include practice on word ordering within a sentence, text reconstruction, or ordering sentences within a paragraph will all groom students on reading. There are also extensive reading comprehension passages with

accompanying word helps and comprehension questions at the end of each session. This feature is a standard characteristic of all computer-aided programmes.

Writing: activities such as fill-in-the blanks, multiple choice, and true or false questions, help students to write at word level. While programmes that require retrieval of information, demand problem-solving skills and Word processing in the target language are ideal for writing practice. Some word processors are bilingual and provide on-line assistance with dictionaries, spell checks and grammar helps. When the multimedia technology is used interactively among students in cooperative writing activities, writing skills are developed.

Culture: The visual component makes video-based activities well suited for observing cultural characteristics in a live context. Videotapes, satellite broadcasts, internet sites such as YouTube and interactive videodiscs provide ways of developing cultural sensitivity for example solecism is highly curtailed. Observation is the major activity here and paralinguistic is taught or imbibed. Moreover, computer simulations delivered through distance education are not only grounded in constructivists theory and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development but were designed to fill the roles of coached learning, two-way communication, individual discovery, and interactive learning practice (Lunce, 2004). This paper holds that the skills learnt by pre-service teachers using computer simulations to learn in the MLL are transferable as pedagogic skills in their own classrooms later in life.

Testing: The MLL provides a comprehensive, fast and accurate way of testing students' language skill. Students can also self-test using Computer Aided Instruction, (CAI) programmes because CAI has the potential to both supervise student performance and to monitor, record, and analyse data about learning performance (Harmer, 2007; Salaberry, 2001) Teachers also use testing in an instructional way when matched with activities e.g. dictation can be used to test listening, reading to test speech works, pronunciation and listening to test comprehension and respect for punctuation marks.

IMPLICATIONS FOR OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATORS

The major policy implication for distance education in Nigeria is effective implementation. In 2005, the recommendation was that the National Open University of Nigeria should consider integrating the MLL into its National Educational TV center Lagos and the Repository, Production, Distribution, and Administration Headquarters (REPRODAhq) (Ofemile, 2005). As at 2018, the functions of the REPRODAhq have been subsumed under the Directorate of Instructional Resources Development (DIRD) and the Open Educational Resources (OER) Unit. Thus, this paper is of the opinion that National Open University of Nigeria should consider integrating the MLL into the multimedia laboratory of the DIRD while the OER unit supply's some of its teaching materials and each location should have a K_U band satellite receiver to uninterrupted signals. The MLL should be placed in study centres, zonal offices and collaborating institutions for use in language teaching and learning.

With regards to successful implementation, Hockly and Dudeney (2005) and Ofemile (2005) separately suggested that the teacher trainer using the MLL must take the following tips for effectiveness and efficiency. Get some qualifications on online and open and distance training, acquire more IT training in order to solve technical and general questions from learners and never assume anything.

In addition, learners must be given adequate support, motivation and encouragement through positive and balanced feedback, creating the right environment for learners and the encouragement to socialize and join study groups. Furthermore, educators must deal with all problems overtly and be proactive in pedagogical approach to language learning issues and problems when using the MLL, develop participant skills in the learners because the open and distance teacher is basically a facilitator.

Thus, the educator should encourage critical thinking and reflection in the learners as per what they read, allow learners to positively plan their programme closure and must reflect and revise by listening to the learners, observing them and getting participant feedback (Hockly & Dudeney, 2005; Ofemile, 2005).

Distance education providers, related research institutes, and other stakeholders should consider combining capacity with experience for the successful integration of technology such as the MLL for language education. For distance education, partners may include NOUN, the National Teachers' Institute, tertiary institutions offering distance learning, and government agencies such as National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA), National Space Research and Development Agency (NASRDA), Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC).

Just as in 2005, there is still the need for a sustained multiplatform, multidisciplinary and collaborative publicity strategy to let people know about this facility. NOUN's directorate of media and publicity could use print, electronic, and social media to publicise the resource. In addition, specialized workshops could be organised by the Regional Training and Research Institute for Open and Distance Learning (RETRIDAL) to build capacity and create awareness regarding the MLL among stakeholders in the area of language teaching and learning.

CONCLUSION

For users of this facility, they must come to each session well prepared, attend classes regularly and obey the rules of the language laboratory. The technology available as enhanced by pervasive computing potentially brings changes in both educator and students' roles. Students are given more responsibilities for their own learning while the educator acts are a facilitator, guide and resource expert. In addition, the educator monitors students who work in groups as collaborative learners and makes better observation of the learning process. With wider integration into NOUN's IT infrastructure, the MLL has potential to be self-financing if properly managed. However, all of these require multilevel funding and interdisciplinary approach to be successful.

Further Research

Research work should be encouraged, funded and carried out in this aspect of open and distance learning. Specifically, further research could focus on how to train educators as instructional designers that meet industry standards this may provide trained manpower for the utilization of the MLL. Research may also focus on the possibility of using alternative energy sources to power the MLL in view of inadequacy of power supply. Consideration may also be given to industry-based research to identify localised ways of MLL equipment manufacture and maintenance.

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