

Modalities of Remote Instruction of French as a Foreign Language among Selected Universities in Western Kenya

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Abstract: This study dealt with modalities of remote instruction of French as a Foreign Language in selected universities in Western Kenya, using the descriptive research designs. The analysis of data involved the descriptive and the thematic approaches. The study involved three universities purposively selected since they are the only ones that offered French as a foreign language in Western Kenya. The collection of data took place through a questionnaire and key informant interviews. Based on the findings, the study concludes that the availability of the teaching and learning equipment for remote teaching of FFL is critically low. Likewise, there was limited educators' use of the remote teaching approach, which reduced the students' interactivity and hindered timely feedback. Much as the majority of educators possessed high confidence in the use of technology, their use of technology was low due to limited ability to use technology. The study recommends that the university administration invest in purchasing technological equipment for the universities to realize effective teaching and learning. There is a need to provide workshops for educators to grasp the essence of the use of technology toward effective learning. There is also a need to universities to invest in ICT workshops and courses that can support FFL virtual instruction.

Keywords: Kenya; Remote learning; French as a foreign Language; Skill gaps; pedagogical competencies.

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Introduction

The need for utilizing remote learning in foreign language teaching gained prominence in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic that spread across the world in 2020 (Dwivedi et al., 2020; Paudel, 2021; Altbach & de Wit, 2021). The pedagogical shift to remote instruction has become an essential element in teaching and learning in universities in the post Covid 19 period. Although there is a growing shift to remote teaching, especially in language instruction (Stanley, 2017; Dong, 2018; Gratz & Looney, 2020), the practice is less common in the context of French as a Foreign Language (FFL) teaching (Gratz & Looney, 2020). Furthermore, although previous studies addressed benefits of remote teaching (Makokha & Mutisya, 2016; Tarhini et al., 2014; Kayange 2019), challenges (Almaiah & Alamri, 2018; Almaiah & Mulhem, 2020) and infrastructure development (Kayange, 2019; Tembo and Mwale, 2019), little has been done to establish the educators and students' actual practices in technology-enhanced language learning (Arnold & Ducate, 2015), and more specifically in the FFL contexts. This situation justifies the need to establish whether university students and faculty members in Kenya are sufficiently prepared to undertake online teaching/learning in modern African economies.

Recent studies on remote learning use established that most instructors either experience an ambivalence when they shift from the traditional face to face to virtual teaching (Comas-Quinn, 2011) or are resistant to embrace dynamic pedagogical practices that enhance more inclusive online learning environments (Gratz & Looney, 2020; Cutri & Mena, 2020). Such issues can be particularly challenging in the teaching of complex foreign languages such as French as a Foreign Language (FFL) in the Kenyan context. This calls for the need to establish remote teaching and learning modalities in low-income economies.

Remote Learning in Kenyan Context

Despite the efforts by stakeholders to support technology in higher education (Dwivedi et al., 2020; Paudel, 2021; Altbach & de Wit, 2021), empirical evidence reveals that tutors' integration of these technologies, especially in the teaching of foreign languages is relatively wanting (Bai and Lo, 2018; Huang et al., 2019; Li, 2017). Research has revealed that instructors require necessary skills to integrate technologies such as remote teaching in language instruction effectively. Such skills include ability to handle software and hardware issues

(Compton, 2009), ability to maintain the relationship with students (Guichon (2009) and ability to make right decisions in the teaching context (Li, 2017). However, existing research indicates that lecturers in Kenyan universities face various skill gaps, such as inadequate training to facilitate online interaction with the learners on the virtual platform (Muuro et al., 2014).

Research indicates that remote learning initiatives in institutions of higher education in Kenya face multiple challenges that impede its effective implementation, (Nyerere, 2012; Muuro, 2014; Tarus & Gichoya, 2015). It has been established that most of the remote learning implementation plans in Kenya have not succeeded (Wright, et al., (2009; Muuro, 2014) with evidence showing that learners are not receiving the required support in virtual instruction (Nyerere, et al., 2012). These drawbacks have led to a slow uptake of e-learning in institutions of higher education in Kenya (Nyerere, 2016). The 2006 National Information Communication Technology (ICT) Policy that was meant to guide e-learning practices in the country for 10 years, and which was later addressed in the National ICT policy of 2016 (Nyerere, 2016) has failed in its mandate. This is because, up to date, Kenya still does not have a clearly defined national e-Learning policy framework to guide its pedagogical implementation. As reported by Tarus and Gichoya (2015), the lack of operational e-Learning policies hindered the implementation of remote learning in Kenyan public universities. Altbach and de Wit (2020) further observed that most University faculty members, especially those from low-income countries have limited training or exposure to facilitate remote teaching. Such instructors would prefer face to face teaching (Cutri & Mena, 2020). This trend calls for researchers to address skill gaps and related factors that impede teachers and students' level of technology integration in FFL instruction.

Theoretical Framework

From the point of view of information and communication technology, researchers often utilize four learning theories in the creation of instructional environments in the digital age: behaviorism, cognitivism, constructivism and connectivism (Mechlova & Malcik, 2012). This study used the Connectivism theory, which is highly relevant to studies that deal with remote teaching and learning.

According to Siemens (2005), in connectivism, learning takes place when learners connect to and participate in a learning community. The theory

postulates that effective learning becomes better when teachers present similar areas of interest to their learners. Such pedagogy facilitates teacher-learner interaction, sharing, dialoguing and thinking together. Participation leads to conversations between learners and other members of the community. In this era of online teaching and learning, these conversations consist of not only words but also images shared through video, multimedia and other digital platforms.

Milligan (2006) contended that with digitalization, learners are able to create personal learning environments (PLEs) which allow for the production and consumption of learning resources. Foreign language learners and teachers could make use of these platforms to interact, share, dialogue and think together. These learners could use digital platforms such as blogs, wikis and social media platforms to make connections with content, learning communities and other learners to create and construct knowledge (Siemens & Downes, 2008). This study, therefore, sought to establish modalities of remote instruction of French as a Foreign Language in selected Kenyan Universities.

Methodology

Research Design

The study used the descriptive research designs. The analysis of data involved descriptive and the thematic approach.

Population and Sampling

The study involved three universities purposively selected since they are the only ones that offer French as a foreign language in Western Kenya. The population comprised students, lecturers and ICT technical support staff. The study randomly selected 208 second and third-year students as respondents

out of 693 students doing FFL. The study also utilized six FFL lecturers and six ICT technical staff as key informants (two lecturers and 2 ICT personnel from each of the three universities). The selection criteria of the key informants were at least five years of working experience in their institutions of work.

Sources of Data

Data collection took place for three weeks through a questionnaire administered to second and third-year university students and key informant interviews with FFL lecturers and Information Communication Technology (ICT) staff in three Universities.

Ethical Considerations

The researchers obtained the ethical clearance from the Institutional Ethical Review of Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology before data collection took place. The researchers used the data only for the purpose of the study. Participation was voluntary.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the results of the study based on guiding research questions.

Objective 1: To establish the availability of teaching/learning equipment for teaching FFL.

The first objective sought to establish the availability of teaching/learning equipment for teaching FFL as it appears in Table 1. The questionnaire had four options for respondents to choose, where 1 = not available in lecture rooms, 2 = available in some of lecturer rooms, 3 = available in all lecture rooms and 4 = available upon request.

Table 1: Available ICT equipment for the teaching of FFL

Available Equipment	1	2	3	4
Computers	76	20		4
Interactive whiteboards	94	6		
Video conferencing systems	97	3		
Audio equipment (including software)	68			32
Digital photo cameras (including editing software)	76			24
Digital video cameras (including editing software)	78			22
Projection system	82			18

Table 1 further shows limited availability of teaching/learning equipment for teaching FFL as the majority of respondents indicated that none of the lecturer rooms had computers (76%), interactive whiteboards (94%), video conferencing systems

(97%), audio equipment (68%), digital photo cameras (76%), digital video cameras (78%) and projection systems (82%). Only very few respondents indicated that limited facilities were available in some of the lecturer rooms, and very

few respondents indicated the availability of facilities upon request. Through interview, respondents reported availability of a computer laboratory with an interactive white board donated by the French embassy in 2018. However, the equipment was too old and was not functioning well. This was probably one of the few available teaching and learning equipment in some of the lecturer rooms as reported by the questionnaire data. The existing laboratories could accommodate only a few students at a time due to limited number of computers.

The interview further revealed that the institutions did not have required online equipment for the teaching and learning of FFL. The lecturers and students had to depend on their own laptops or smartphones during the teaching and learning process. Similarly, Kashorda and Waema (2014) reported lack of adequate ICT facilities in most

universities in Kenya. The interview further revealed that the attendance to online classes recorded very few students compared to those who attended physical classes. This experience would be due to limited computers in the laboratories since some of the students did not have alternative gadgets like smartphones for accessing the online programs. Therefore, the availability of teaching/learning equipment for teaching FFL was limited.

Objective 2: To establish time spent in personal work compared to time spent in remote learning of FFL in a week.

This objective sought to establish the time students spent in personal work compared to the time they spent in remote learning of FFL. The aim of this section was to reveal whether students took technology as a serious opportunity or not for enhancing the learning of FFL as reflected in table 2.

Hours Spent	Personal Work		FFL Learning	
	f	%	f	%
5 or less	104	50	29	14
6 to 10	33	16	13	6
11 and above	21	10	8	4
TOTAL	158	76	50	24

Information from table 2 shows that the majority of students (76%) used technology for personal activities compared to close to a quarter (24%) of sampled students who spent their time in the learning of FFL. The table further shows that time spent in the use of computers for the majority of students was five hours or less for personal use (50%) and for FFL (14%). Those students who spent 6 to 10 hours were 33 (16%) for personal use and 13 (6%) for FFL. Those who spent 11 or more hours were 21 (10%) and eight (4%) for personal work and for FFL, respectively. Therefore, the personal use of technology dominated in personal issues rather than in the learning of FFL remotely. This implies that students did not take technology as an essential tool for enhancing the learning of FFL. Contrarily, literature recommends that for successful remote learning, students need to spend sufficient time in the use of computer for academic purposes like reviewing the course content or doing assignments (Howland & Moore, 2002; Huber & Lowry, 2003).

Objective 3: To establish the educators' preference in the use of remote compared to the face-to-face approach in Teaching FFL.

This objective sought to establish the educators' preference in the use of remote compared to face-to-face approach in Teaching FFL. Data from the students' questionnaire revealed that most lecturers preferred the use of face-to-face approach compared to the remote teaching. Students revealed that educators utilized the remote approach only when physical classes were not possible. Students further reported that educators who utilized the e-learning approach simply uploaded notes on the teaching and learning platforms.

This trend is similar to what Nyerere et al. (2012) had established that most universities in Kenya only employ asynchronous modes of delivering remote learning where the lecturers simply upload the course content in the form of lecture notes, tests and assignments on the universities' virtual platforms. The limited use of remote approach reduces the interactivity of students when learning outside the classrooms. It reduces timely feedback and it reduces learners' interest in remote learning (Gaskell & Mills, 2014).

Objective 3: To establish educators' self-efficacy in the use of the remote teaching and learning approach.

Table 3 shows lecturers' self-efficacy in the use of the remote learning approach. The table indicates

that the majority of teachers (59%) expressed high confidence in the use of technology, followed by slightly more than one third of the educators who indicated moderate confidence and very few (5.5%) who indicated low confidence.

Table 4: Lecturers' Confidence in Using Technology

Rating	Frequency	%
Low confidence	9	5.5
Moderate confidence	57	34.9
High confidence	97	59.5

Therefore, this trend shows that educators had high self-efficacy in the use of technology even though their use of technology to support the teaching and learning process was limited as revealed in the previous objective of this study. As noted by Schunk and Pajares (2002), lack of self-efficacy negatively affects the academic motivation and achievement of students. Technology and pedagogical self-efficacy positively correlate with online learning efficiency (Yoo et al., 2012; Wang & Newlin, 2002). Therefore, it is worthy appreciation that educators' self-efficacy toward the use of the remote approach in the teaching and learning process.

Although the majority of the educators expressed high self-efficacy in the use of the remote teaching, students reported that some educators had both technical and pedagogical skill gaps in conducting the virtual lessons. Particularly, some students complained that some educators never responded on chat messages in the Google Meet classes while others took too long to admit the learners into the virtual classrooms. In one instance, a student reported that some of their lecturers depended on the ICT technical staff to help them operate the virtual lessons. In the absence of technical staff, the virtual class's quality would be limited.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusions

Based on the findings, the study concludes that the availability of the teaching and learning equipment for remote teaching of FFL is critically low. Students used technology majorly for personal activities rather than for FFL learning. They did not take technology as an essential tool for enhancing the learning of FFL. Likewise, there was limited educators' use of the remote teaching approach. Most of them preferred the use of the face-to-face approach compared to the remote teaching. The educators who utilized the e-learning approach simply uploaded notes on the teaching and learning

platforms. The limited use of technology reduced the students' interactivity and hindered timely feedback. Much as the majority of educators possessed high confidence in the use of technology, their use of technology was low due to limited ability to use technology.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions, the study recommends that the university administration invest in purchasing technological equipment for the universities to realize effective teaching and learning. There is a need to provide workshops for educators to grasp the essence of the use of technology toward effective learning. The universities should strive to change students' attitudes for them to take the remote teaching and learning approach more seriously. There is also a need to universities to invest in ICT workshops and courses that can support FFL virtual instruction.

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