

Student Experiences with Online Platforms: Critical Perspectives from Teaching and Learning of French as a Foreign Language (FFL) in Kenyan Universities

Rose Auma¹, Benard Mudogo*², Joyce Kasili³, Frida Miruka⁴, Lydia Anyonje⁵

^{1, 2, 3,4,5} Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Kenya

E-mail: ² dmudogo@mmust.ac.ke

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Abstract: Limited empirical evidence is available in the context of teaching and learning French as a Foreign Language (FFL) as to whether the online platforms meet the needs of the learners. We seek to establish the needs and experiences of university students during the online teaching and learning of French as a foreign language (FFL) in sub-Saharan Africa, with specific focus on the Kenyan context. The results are based on three constructs; instructional materials, student support services and lecturers' preparedness. A survey questionnaire was administered to 81 students in their third and final years of study in three universities in Western Kenya. The results demonstrate that students do not feel that the available online pedagogical practices meet their language competencies in learning FFL. Language policymakers must consider such results alongside local implementation resistance in implementing FFL online learning programs.

Keywords: French as a Foreign Language; online programs; learners' needs; Universities; language policy.

Introduction

The 21st century has been characterized by the accelerated integration of Information Communication Technology (ICT) in education in general and higher education in particular across the globe. Most notably, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 called for the urgent need to shift from traditional face-to-face instruction to online platforms in the teaching and learning in higher education (Dwivedi et al., 2020; Salmi, 2021).

Institutions of higher education, particularly those from Sub-Saharan Africa have also started to embrace online teaching and learning platforms (Mseleku, 2020), yet there has been little empirical evidence on how those ICTs meet their intended aims for the present and the future (Altbach & de Wit, 2020). The following key questions arise: How do institutions and stakeholders design online instructional materials to meet the needs of FFL students? How do they best support the students' challenges in accessing online platforms? How effective is the FFL lecturers' preparation? Ultimately, we seek to add knowledge to the growing field of language teaching and empower scholars,

policymakers, and stakeholders with the broad understanding needed to enhance the quality of online teaching and learning in higher education in developing countries.

The rapid transition from traditional face-to-face teaching to virtual learning platforms is becoming increasingly necessary (Altbach & de Wit, 2020). However, as observed by Network (2014), such engagement should make a dynamic, interactive learning environment for students to explore and apply concepts creatively with their teacher. In this case, the teacher assumes the instructor's role for group sessions, all the while providing directions for the learners in their individual learning spaces online. In low-income countries such as the Kenyan case, virtual instruction is characterized by a wide lack of skilled manpower, and unreliable internet connectivity (Altbach & de Wit, 2020; Mseleku, 2020).

Literature Review

Students' needs in an online environment

As observed by Puzziferro (2008) and Chang & Smith, (2008), students who are more contented in their online learning models tend to have higher learning outcomes. In developing countries such as Kenya, university students come from a diverse range of backgrounds, in regard to their education, culture, and socioeconomic status. However, with the shifting in modes of learning from face-to-face to virtual platforms, it is necessary for institutions, scholars and education stakeholders to consider where these students come from, their experiences with digital learning, and the social-emotional support they would require during such cases (Gopikrishna, 2021). In addition, changes in web-based technology coupled with competition among higher institutions of higher learning and the acceptance of distance modes of instruction have led to the growing demand for online teaching (Salmi, 2021) due to the ability of institutions to adapt and change to meet individual learners needs, and the ability to use different innovative strategies within the lessons (Dhawan, 2020).

However, existing research reveals that some online teaching has led to negative student experiences (Day et al., 2021). This is especially when the existing ICT infrastructure and personnel do not meet the expected needs of the students. For instance, there have been concerns that faculty members, especially those from lower-and middle-economies have very limited training and skills in remote teaching (Altbach & de Wit, 2020), while many others are resistant to implementing new pedagogical practices like online teaching (Gratz & Looney, 2020).

While scholars argue that online teaching has significant benefits in the current competitive global-based economy (Altbach & de Wit, 2020; Oleksiyenko et al., 2020), significant challenges remain. These challenges range from lack of skilled lecturers, increased workload and attitudes of both the faculty members and the students, and lack of internet connection (Day et al., 2021; Kemp, 2020; Mseleku, 2020) among others. This means that effective online teaching depends heavily on the design of the content and learning technologies.

Given this, the use of technology can only be effective when the instructors are very skilled in its application in pedagogy. Mupinga et al. (2006) state that as students come to class, they all have their own particular learning experiences, expectations, and needs to be addressed, to which instructors need to be sensitive in order to maximize their learning experiences. It has also been established that students who utilize online platforms for learning often exhibit lack of confidence in their ability to interpret assignments and feel that they need the verbal guidance that face-to-face learning environments offer (Howland and Moore, 2002). This means that the needs and experiences of online students are crucial in helping to design appropriate virtual programs.

Online teaching modes

Online teaching modes can either be synchronous or asynchronous. The two modes differ in terms of time and place of the activities involved in teaching and learning. For instance, in asynchronous settings, on one hand, students can view learning material at any time they wish and are less instructor-dependent (Murphy et al., 2011; Xie et al., 2018). However, students need more self-study skills to stay on track and reduce the risks of likely falling behind in their learning (Hartnett, 2015; Kim et al., 2019). Synchronous learning, on the other hand, requires the students to log in and participate in class at a specific time each week (Blau et al., 2017).

The class cannot be rescheduled and the learners may have assignments to complete away from the class. This means the students have to follow a given timetable. There is convergence among education scholars who state that there is better acquisition of skills and task motivation by learners when they are taught in a synchronous online setting (Nsa et al., 2012; Ogbonna et al., 2019; Hrastinski, 2008). However, cognitive development is gained better in asynchronous settings (Hrastinski, 2008; Ogbonna et al., 2019). Also, synchronous learning positively impacts learners' commitment and their

task motivation. Although scholars such as Fabrizz et al., (2021) have established that students who utilize synchronous online study modes show learning outcomes in terms of peer-centered activities such as feedback in comparison to students in mostly asynchronous settings, it is important for education stakeholders to assess the needs and background experiences of the students before choosing which online mode to apply in a specific context (Mupinga et al. (2006)).

Method

We opted for a questionnaire survey, which was administered to 81 third-year and final-year students of FFL in three universities in Western Kenya. This is because these students were in the first and second year of study during the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020. During the pandemic, learning shifted online and they had an experience of online learning. All of the students were studying for the Bachelor of Education - French. The questionnaire consisted of 12 semi structured open questions. The questions focused on the three constructs/variables, instructional materials, students' support services, and FFL lecturers' preparedness. The data was collected in March 2023. Before data collection, initial ethical clearance was obtained from the Institutional Ethical Review Committee (IERC). The students were informed that their responses would be only used for the purpose of the study. The participation in filling the questionnaire was voluntary and the respondents filled the consent forms on volition before participating in the study.

Results and Discussion

Instructional Materials Used by the Learners

This section answers questions on instructional materials used by students for FFL learning. Table 1 presents our findings regarding the gadgets used by students for online learning of FFL.

Table 1. Gadget Used by Students to Access Online Learning

Materials	Frequency	Percentage
Smart phones	49	61
Laptop	23	28
Computers	9	11

As inferred from Table 1 above, majority of the students utilized smartphones (61%) to access online FFL learning platforms. A very small fraction of the students (28%) had personal laptops while only 11% of them had access to institutional

computers. This means that most institutions did not have the requisite online equipment for the teaching and learning of FFL. The students had to depend on their own smartphones. This would be a big disadvantage to those who did not have their own smartphones. These findings agree with those of Wasike et al (2021) who found out in their study that majority of students in Kenya use their smartphones for online learning.

The data also revealed that YouTube and Google and are the most preferred search engines for FFL content. However, students also utilized as well, including KENET web to access audio and video clips for FFL content. However, some students reported that they did not access any FFL content online. This is a worrying trend considering the significant role played by online platforms for the teaching and learning of FFL. Table 2 presented below shows how often the students used online resources.

Table 2. How Often Students Use Online Resources for Learning EFL

	Never	%	Rarely	%	Half the time	%	Always	%
Online books And Journals	3	4%	8	10%	17	21%	12	15%
Online audio clips	4	5%	6	4%	11	14%	19	23%
Duolingo	1	1%	1	1%			1	1%
YouTube							1	1%

It is evident from the table above that majority of the students used the following online resources: online journals and books, online audio clips, Duolingo and YouTube. However, as indicated in Table 2, the majority used online journals and online audio clips. Only a small fraction used other online platforms such as Duolingo and YouTube. This shows that they had very limited choices when navigating online resources. It also indicates a positive attitude of the students towards the use of ICT.

Most of the respondents observed that the online lessons were useful for their exams. The reasons given for this were that they aroused interest, enhanced learning, helped with comprehension, pronunciation and spellings and built speaking skills. Other reasons were revision, research, coverage of a wide range of topics, it was the easiest way to learn a concept and they gave additional information on what had been learned. Such assertions are in line with previous researches which have underscored the significant role played by online platforms in facilitating teaching and learning in the contemporary world (Altbach & de Wit, 2020; Oleksiyenko et al., 2020). However, some students did not respond to this question, an indicator that not many online classes were taking place.

Mupinga et al. (2006), acknowledges the fact that the needs of the learners should be a key factor to consider before implementing the online learning programmes. If this is not done, the students may feel frustrated due to their negative experiences (Day et al., 2021)

The kind of support the students received from the institutions for online learning

The table below indicates the kind of support students got from the institutions for online learning.

Table 3. Institutional support for ICT in FFL learning

	Frequency	%
Student induction	60	74%
Provision of equipment	17	21%
Provision of bundles	13	16%
Provision of technical staff	21	26%
Others		

Table 3 shows that student induction was done in most universities. However, the major problems seemed to be the provision of the necessary equipment with only 21% of the students admitting that their institution provided such. Mseleku, (2020) cites lack of ICT equipment in Sub-Saharan Africa as one of the major challenges facing online pedagogies. This trend seems to be more prevalent in the Kenyan context, with students lamenting their frustrations of accessing the necessary institutional ICT equipment such as computers, audio equipment and software. 16% of the students said that they were provided with bundles while only 21% had access to technical support. It was also revealed that internet connectivity in the universities was poor. This impeded the facilitation of online teaching. Students reported lack of interaction while online and lack of motivation as challenges to online learning. Research has demonstrated that learners who utilize online platforms can only acquire useful skills when there is effective tutor-learner interaction (Nsa et al., 2012; Ogbonna et al., 2019). However, such interaction in the present case was minimal.

Whether online tools meet learning needs of FFL students

Majority of the students agreed that online tools met their needs, as one indicates below:

“Yes, further reading 1, access anytime, anywhere, access notes, pronunciation, creating sentences, translations, exciting, help develop speaking skills, for research and assignments, saves time and space”

However, some students felt online learning did so fairly and others not, because they lacked in-depth explanation of concepts from the information sources and they were not able to ask questions for clarification. A few, however felt that they needed more information on given topics from their lectures.

Most learners were positive on the significant role played by online platforms in the learning of FFL. However, there are those who said that there was no provision of feedback. This calls for a tailor-made model that can provide feedback to learners.

Lecturers’ preparation

The students reported that their lecturers used online platforms to teach some FFL classes such as translation and interpretation. However, the utilization was minimal averaging to about 4 hours per week. It was also established that learners were not aware of any existing online model for teaching FFL and that online engagement only occurred when physical contact was impeded.

It was evident that most lecturers did not use online platforms for teaching FFL as reported by the respondents. Those who used online platforms did so when giving assignments, when away from the duty station, during exams, when having classes at night or when physical classes could not take place. A few used them to give notes and during normal lectures. This shows the preference of physical classes over online platforms in the teaching of FFL. Previous research has established that effective interaction between the lecturers and students is key for meaningful online learning (Fabriz et al., 2021). Thus, when online classes are not as interactive as they ought to be, meaningful learning is impeded.

It was also established that the feedback from online classes was either delayed or was lacking. For instance, most of them reported that they received minimal feedback from their lecturers. Still, those who got feedback were very few an indicator that there was poor receipt of feedback from the lecturers. Feedback is important in letting the learner know their progress and lack of it could discourage them all together. It is therefore important that there is regular feedback in online learning. (Nazir, Davis, & Harris, (2015) established that effective feedback is one of the most significant ways of engaging and retaining online learners.

Implications for future directions.

1. Strategies to be put in place to improve the use of online tools

Internet connectivity, lack of the necessary equipment and provision of technical support seemed to be the major obstacles hindering online learning. Students felt that online learning could be improved by approving student-friendly online tools, use of more virtual aids and provision of bundles, provision of stable internet and improvement of connectivity, training, keeping class attendance and provision of equipment. Other suggestions made by them were giving a quiz after each topic, giving them access to premium learning accounts and the setting up of a website for students to access whenever they wished. It is evident that despite the challenges, students are still interested in accessing online tools, hence the importance of having an online model for French.

2. Online learning models and learners' needs

It is clear from the above that students want an online model that is simple and interactive, but with valuation and prompt feedback. It should be learner-centered and adapted to their level and needs. The model should be accessible to all, should provide a course outline, examples, activities, exercises, marks and should include audio lessons for pronunciation. This is particularly important given that the status of language in Kenya is foreign and learners only meet it in class.

It was also revealed that no online model existed in the teaching of FFL. Learners insisted on the need for feedback in online teaching and that the model should be more efficient, should be scheduled at a convenient time for all and should allow the lecturer to monitor the students. They prefer to have a system that can accommodate a large number of students, one that provides for evaluation at the end of each session and prompt feedback. The model should be written in French. Tools should be user friendly and students should be given more time online.

Conclusion

The data has revealed that majority of the students used online tools for learning. However, there is no online specific online tailored model provided for the teaching/learning of FFL in Kenyan universities, despite the fact that French is a foreign language that has its own specific needs. The findings have also revealed that online learners in Kenyan universities mainly use the smartphone for online learning since the

computers available in the institutions are very few. The students do not get adequate technical assistance and where training in use of online tools was done, very few students were involved. There were also challenges in terms of poor connectivity or total lack of internet for students' use in the institutions. This was coupled with lack of relevant content in the online tools available, lack of equipment, software and bundles. Majority of the students however felt that the online tools played an important role in the learning of FFL. The study also found out that majority of the lecturers did not use ICT in teaching of FFL and those who used it mainly did so when they were away from their duty stations. This could be due to lack of competency in use of ICT.

Recommendations

There is need for the development of an online tool tailored to suit the needs of teaching and learning of FFL. The said tool should be interactive and give provisions for feedback from the learners to their lecturers. It is also recommended that control mechanisms be put in place to monitor the learners working online and to keep them focused on their learning. It is proposed that training be done for all users, i.e. the students and lecturers to improve on their ICT competency. Institutions should provide learner friendly environments to enable students access online lessons and should thus improve on the provision of connectivity. Further, Institutions should take advantage of the positive attitude of students towards the use of online tools to implement ICT in teaching/learning at the university level. There is also need for the institutions to motivate their faculty members so as to change their negative attitudes towards the utilization of virtual teaching. This could be done through training and provision of support services towards the implementation of the use of ICT in teaching/learning.

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