

The Influence of Online Lessons in Learning English Language amid Covid-19 in Namibian Schools

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Abstract

This research sought to examine the influence of online English lessons occasioned by the Covid-19 restrictions and how high school students were affected in four Namibian schools given the high failure rate in English Language by Namibian learners. The study employed a mixed method approach as this helped to achieve the research objectives. This study's sample was four schools all located in Khomas region in Windhoek, Namibia's capital city. Accessibility motivated the selection of the schools. The study was undergirded by the discourse analytical theory which states that our access to reality is always through languages. Therefore, it follows that for learners to understand reality they need to learn the language which in this case is English. The findings indicated that there was a plethora of challenges. Hence, there is need to have strategies in pace to mitigate effectively this risk in case of future lockdowns.

Keywords: English language, Covid-19, learners, teachers, online lessons

Lack of progress in the learning of English Language frustrates learners possibly creating negative attitudes towards its teaching and learning, hence teachers are also likely to feel frustrated with the process of teaching (Kadodo & Muzira, 2019). An historical look will serve to put this in context. The history of language policy in Namibia dates back to the colonial period. From 1884 to 1915, Namibia was colonised by the Germans who imposed German as official language. From 1920 South Africa took over and instituted Afrikaans alongside English as official languages in Namibia (Frydman, 2011; UNICEF, 2016).

It is essential to note that, our world is changing because of technology and there is need to adapt to this digital world especially in English Language learning through online lessons. OECD (2020) notes that the Covid-19 crisis forced school closures in 188 countries, heavily disrupting the learning process of more than 1,7 billion children, youth and their families. Namibia was not spared the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic since it forced the closure of schools thereby disrupting Grade nine English lessons amongst

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others.

According to Nakale (2020), Namibia has more than 800 000 learners in both private and public schools, with more than 30 000 teachers nationally. However, not all teachers and learners have access to online learning, as some live in remote areas, where connectivity is non-existent. This shows that some students were greatly disadvantaged by the e-learning due to the total lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore it follows that, Namibia's adoption of e-learning is still dogged by a myriad of challenges that needs to be addressed if it is to be a success. Since the outbreak of the corona virus in China in late December 2019, the Covid-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented disruptive influence on people's lives across the globe. However, despite the widespread enthusiasm towards e-learning, its use remains in an embryonic stage (Barteit et al. 2019; Eke, 2010; Liu et al., 2010).

Therefore, the study set out to find how the level of effectiveness of online lessons in learning English Language amid Covid-19 in Namibian schools.

Literature Review

The outbreak of the corona virus has caused unprecedented disruptions to lives and livelihoods including the education sector. According to Harrison (2020) since many countries have imposed a lockdown on movement and many schools have subsequently closed their doors, vast numbers of previously tech-shy teachers are having to learn very quickly how to teach using online resources. According to Nakale (2020), over 20 000 Namibian teachers countrywide have indicated that they have access to online learning tools and can connect to platforms such as WhatsApp. This however, forms part of modalities laid out by the line ministry to ensure teaching and learning continue amid the national Covid-19 lockdown.

Nashilongo (2020) notes that, like much of the rest of the world, Namibia too came under a total economic and social shutdown, due to the global Covid-19 pandemic. A national state of emergency was declared, and the nation joined the rest of the world in a sit and wait-out situation. This actually brought pandemonium and dilemma in every area of life - personal level, economic and the education of children. Shikololo (2020) states that two weeks into the national shutdown, the government, through the Ministry of Education Arts and Culture (MoEAC), in an effort to salvage the educational calendar and potentially avoid a setback of at least a year or two, called for the implementation of virtual learning in all Namibian public schools, for the duration of the lockdown and beyond. The directive was that schools would reopen on 20 April 2020, but that no learners would return to school premises, hence the implementation of e-learning, where lessons were to be conducted via television, radio, print media as well as mobile phones. This was a good move to the learners however, there were a myriad of challenges that needed to be addressed for it to be a success.

Most learners do not have electronic gadgets like smartphones, tablets and

either laptops or desktops to use for online lessons in learning English Language amid Covid-19 in Namibian schools (Nashilongo, 2020). This in a way hampers the idea of creating WhatsApp learning groups. Some learners if they have the above mentioned electronic gadgets, then they may not have access to technology like, internet services or if they have may not be able to afford the skyrocketing prices of data bundles. In some cases learners were at the villages where network is erratic. Nashilongo (2020) notes that, the good in the situation was that it disrupted the business-as-usual posture of the education system and unsettled the bureaucracy that sometimes seemed detached from the realities of the education system, such as the fact that not all government schools have access to ICTs. On the other hand, there are chronic issues related to ICT access, technological infrastructure and internet affordability in the country. MoEAC (2020) reveals that access to ICT infrastructure and capacity of teachers and learners to access e-learning is limited to predominantly urban schools.

Namibian Educational Situation amid Covid-19

Clark (2018) notes that English Language teachers have had what might be described as a difficult relationship with technology. This is because initial teacher education has been slow to embrace digital ways of teaching and learning, meaning that many English Language teachers feel that they have been poorly prepared to use technology in their teaching.

Siririka (2020) posits that it has been a roller-coaster in the world of academics since the ministry decided schools resume as planned but via e-learning platforms. The worries were mostly centred on those students and parents who do not have access to the requisite means; that is, the electronic gadgets to access online lessons. NAMPA (2020) notes that the system is not inclusive and many learners and teachers are going to be left out, since not all of them have access to electricity, gadgets or internet. It appears that the introduction of online lessons for Grade eleven students was premature, in fact seemingly opens a can of worms.

According to Nashilongo (2020), the country has about 30 000 teachers in formal schooling and a population of 800 000 pupils who are learning in just over 1900 schools countrywide. Nakale (2020) notes that not all teachers and learners have access to online learning as some live in remote areas, where such connectivity is non-existent. This will thus be the bane of the Namibian government's compulsory education policy that makes for free access to education from primary to secondary schools. Apart from that, Nashilongo (2020) avers that, the Ministry of Education indicated that telecommunication infrastructure remained the biggest challenge, with 32% of schools, that is 614 that currently have no access to telecommunications. Still in the same vein, Nakale (2020) points out that, for those less privileged in terms of online and e-learning, the line ministry has come up with modalities to have production hubs at resource centres and schools, where worksheets will be produced and distributed to learners weekly, taking into consideration health protocols such as social distancing. With these plethora of

challenges in mind, it is clear that free education and online lessons especially in learning English Language amidst Covid-19 in Namibian schools is interdependent and only viable when the required connectivity and ICT infrastructure is in place.

Language Learning in Namibian Schools

Clark (2018) argues that, nowadays, English teachers are better conceptualised as facilitators of learning who provide learning opportunities for their students and give feedback to support improvement. The essence of teaching is not therefore something fixed but rather dynamic, adapting to the context and situation in which each teacher find themselves. Kadodo and Muzira (2019) aver that various language learning theories explain how language attitudes develop in people. When learners are exposed to stimuli, they are seen as capable of learning through association and reinforcement or through observation and imitation. It therefore becomes ironic for the learners to learn when there is no association with other learners. With Bigbluebutton and other Google learning platforms it is easy for learners to interact since they will be in online lesson groups. These need good network for internet access and obviously electricity must be readily available for all this to be viable.

According to the Ministry of Education, 13 000 learners were able to access the ministries e-learning platforms during the national lockdown (Bayer & Nembwaya, 2020). This is actually less than 2% of the total population of 804 000 pupils in both state and private schools in the country. Therefore it follows that, the Grade eleven learners were negatively affected in terms of accessing online lessons in learning English Language amid Covid-19 in Namibian schools. Kadodo and Muzira (2020) note that, if the gratification from the learning activity is very strong and positive, the learning entity becomes highly motivated to learn the target language. In other words, learning English Language for Namibians must promise high returns for the learners such as offering possibly the only sound window for better life through employment. When this happens, it galvanizes the learner to positively work towards actualizing that dream.

Nashilongo (2020) argues that, while it is plausible that throughout the pandemic, the government acted trying to ensure progress in the education sector, the hasty introduction of e-learning had possibly disadvantaged those without connectivity, consigning them to a bleak future.

Skyrocketing Data Bundle Prices

The internet data bundles in Namibia are very expensive and are beyond the reach of the majority. Smit (2019) argues that, due to dominance of urban connectivity and a digital divide that for years has been giving urban areas an advantage, rural schools generally are left in the dark by e-education. This challenge is confirmed by the Inclusive Internet Index (2019), which reported that only 29.5% of households in Namibia use the internet. With less than 30% of households using the internet this translates into

about 70% to 90% of learners and students with limited or no access to education for the duration of the school closure due to Covid-19. This greatly hampered the online lessons in learning English Language amid Covid-19 in Namibian schools. Majority of the Namibian population are youths especially of the school going age either attending high school or enrolled at institutions of higher learning like, universities and vocational schools. Therefore, it follows that, they cannot afford the internet data bundles that are very expensive. Furthermore, Namibia ranked as one of the top ten countries globally with the highest costs of data that has resulted in Namibians continuing to decry the cost of accessing the internet (The Patriot, 2018). With data seemingly this unaffordable and public libraries and multipurpose centres closed during Covid-19, this means even students who have access to laptops, smartphones and tablets could face further challenges in accessing e-learning to its fullest extent.

This puts learners in rural areas at a further disadvantage because, unlike at schools where a learner has access to a book and a teacher; at home, radios belong to parents or guardians who may prioritise their own access, in addition to factors such as breakage, reception problems and battery costs. A 2019 study published by the Institute for Public Policy Research on media and digital challenges revealed that only 11.8% of Namibian households had a television set. Given the fact that television sets are largely electricity operated, the lack of electricity in rural areas further marginalises school communities in rural areas. Some newspapers in Namibia have terminated operations or gone digital, those still operating usually reach remote areas three days to a week later (Remmert, 2019). Apart from that, the learners with their guardians need a lot of money to purchase smartphone devices which are quite expensive. Moreover, they need to be constantly charged with electricity, which is a luxury in many rural communities.

Theoretical Framework

This research was influenced by the discourse analytical theory which states that, our access to reality is always through languages. (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). Therefore, it follows that for learners to understand reality they need to learn the language which in our case is English Language. According to Jorgensen and Phillips (2002), with language we create representations of reality that are never mere reflections of a pre-existing reality, but contribute to constructing reality, meanings and representations which are real. Physical objects also exist, but they only gain meaning through discourse analysis. The relevance of the discourse analytical theory in this study is that for learners to understand reality they need to know the language, which in our case is English Language. The aim of this is to understand the influence of online lessons in learning English Language amid Covid-19 pandemic especially in Namibian schools.

Research Methodology

This research employed a mixed method method as this helped to achieve the research objectives since it provides a detailed description of issues in question thus

generating key information (Maree, 2010). Bernard (1995) asserts that open-ended questions have the ability to evoke responses that are meaningful and culturally salient to participants, sometimes unanticipated by the researcher.

Research Participants

This research focuses on the influence of online lessons in learning English Language amid Covid-19 in four Namibian schools; namely Tanny School, Phonce School, Bert School and Pherd School (pseudo names for ethical reasons). All the high schools are located in Khomas region. The non-probability sampling method was used in this study. Accessibility was an essential factor in selecting the schools since it was easier for the researcher to collect data since the researcher was at one point working in Namibia. Purposive sampling technique was adopted when choosing the eight Grade 11 level English teachers, 40 Grade 11 level English learners and 20 Grade 11 level English parents (Wilson & Sapsford, 2006). Moreover, the four school principals were purposively sampled to ensure that knowledgeable people take part in interviews (Cohen et al., 2011). Telephone interviews were held with the selected teachers, parents and principals while forty students were interviewed online.

The sample was small but information-rich (Denscombe, 2010). This allowed the researcher to comprehend the influence of online lessons in learning English Language amid Covid-19 in four Namibian schools. Windhoek is the capital city of Namibia and is simultaneously the nerve centre of activities in Namibia whilst Khomas region is a key region with many private schools in Namibia and therefore likely to influence perceptions beyond their localities. Furthermore, they can be beacons for people to look up to thereby influencing learning and teaching of English Language in subtle ways that can operate at the subconscious level of language users.

Data Collection Procedures

The researcher got permission to carry out the research study from all relevant stakeholders. Research interviews were conducted by the researcher on different online platforms because of the prevalence of Covid-19 pandemic. Semi-structured online interviews, open and close-ended interview questions, virtual meetings, online lessons observations, focus groups and WhatsApp groups were employed for data collection. WhatsApp was also used by the researcher because it is one of the most popular form of electronic communication in the world, Africa and in Namibia. Amukweshe (2018) notes that one telecommunications company indicated that WhatsApp accounted for 98% of instant messages sent through its network. Gray (2014) argues that interview is effective in gathering information about a person's values, knowledge, preferences and attitudes. The interviews gave the researcher an opportunity to collect qualitative data from four school principals, teachers and parents whilst the questionnaire allowed learners to express their feelings towards the issue at hand. A total of eight English class observations were carried out in selected classes of the four participating schools. The

observation method allowed the researcher to observe the learning and teaching of English Language in relation to other subjects during the Covid-19 pandemic, but also enabled the researcher to hear some of the learners deploying the languages in their learning (Flick, 2002). The research questions allowed the researcher to convert data into useful information as offered by respondents (Tuckman, 1999).

As regards validation of research instruments, the interview guide/questionnaire were tested for content or face validity to determine if they will measure what they were meant to measure. The instruments were also given to research experts for purposes of validation. Based on research experts' recommendations, amendments were made to the research instruments. This research adopted descriptive statistics and thematic data analysis methods. Qualitative data was transcribed, coded, and organized into themes, categories and sub-categories.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical consideration in research is a process of protecting individuals who provide information to researchers (Creswell, 2013). The researcher explained clearly to the participants what the research was all about before they participated in the study. Moreover, ethical considerations mandates the researcher to strive to do well and do no harm to all the participants. This is why pseudo names of participating institutions were used to protect their identities. Apart from that, anonymity and confidentiality were also ensured of all participants who took part in both telephone and online interviews, WhatsApp groups, virtual meetings and online lesson observations. In other words, names of the participants were not recorded and will not be published as a way of guaranteeing their anonymity.

Results and Discussions

The results of the analysis were presented and interpreted in accordance with the research questions. Kadodo and Muzira (2019) note that, the process allows various analytic tools to be used to probe the data, stimulate conceptual thinking, increase sensitivity and provoke alternative interpretations of data. Therefore, some of the data was organized into tables and pie charts for clear interpretation in order to comprehend the influence of online lessons in learning English Language amid Covid-19 in four Namibian schools. Emerging ideas from online interviews, phone calls, online lesson observations, WhatsApp groups and interview questions are collated to crystalize into meaningful ideas (Cobin & Strauss, 2008).

The research participants unanimously agreed that there was a myriad of challenges faced with online lessons in learning and teaching of English Language amid Covid-19 in the four Namibian schools.

Table 1***Participants' View about Myriad Challenges in Online Teaching***

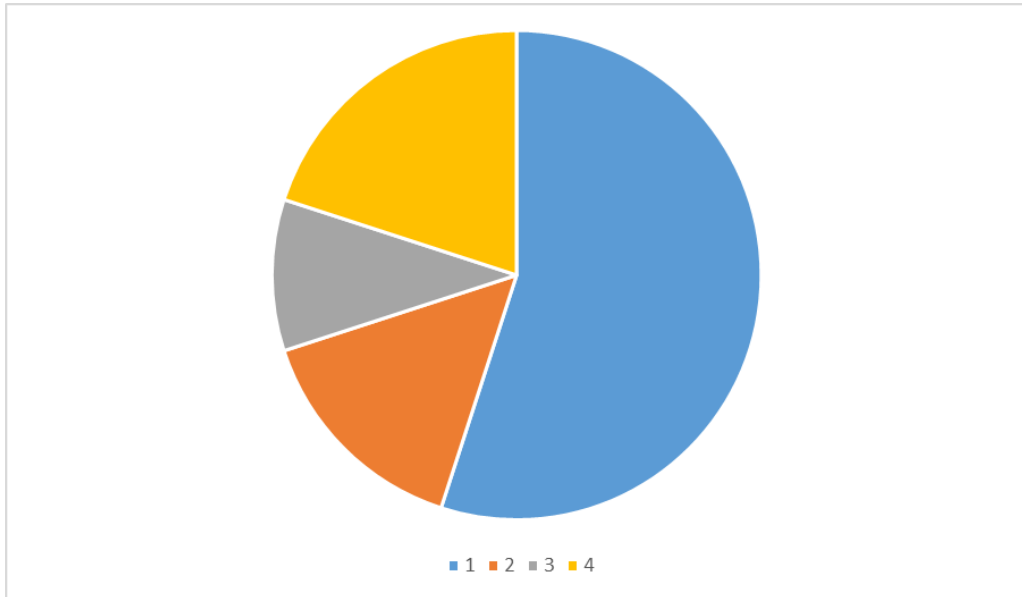
Different groups of participants	Percentage	Myriad of challenges
8 English Teachers	11	Yes
40 Learners	56	Yes
20 Guardian	27	Yes
4 School principals	6	Yes
72 participants	100	Yes

Going by the statistics in Table 1 above, there is need to effectively examine the challenges encountered in learning and teaching of English Language in order to have effective learning and teaching in schools. This means that each group of participants has its own challenges peculiar to themselves. There is need for effective online classes and not just a barrage of WhatsApp notes and audio clips. Muchemwa (2021) notes that students complained and demanded to have online classes and not email and WhatsApp notes only during online lessons. Countries need to prepare strategies to mitigate effectively this risk in case of future lockdowns. There is therefore a need to address lack of realistic planning that consequently resulted in a situation where there is no progress with a governance framework that clearly articulates the importance of the internet in education and the lives of people such as a working information and communications technology (ICT) policy in the education sector. Furthermore, a strategic national ICT policy that is inclusive of all aspects of ICT should be in place. In addition to a regulatory environment that prioritises access to the internet (Nashilongo, 2020).

Another measure would be to monitor closely student engagement by following up on their attendance, behaviour and also learning progress. Furthermore, to address the potential barriers to student engagement there is need to supply adequate resources such as laptops, smart phones or tablets, and a conducive milieu for them to learn. Additionally, individualised support should be provided to students so that they can get the best out of the new modes of education delivery (Gouedard, et al., 2020).

The study's findings indicate a plethora of challenges of online lessons in learning English Language amid Covid-19 in Namibian schools during the total lockdown in the year 2020 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Specific Challenges Experienced by Learners in Online English Lessons



Of the seventy-two participants, 55% of the learners mentioned lack of training in online lessons 15% pointed to lack of access to home Wi-Fi connection, 10% have no access to internet whilst 20% do not have electronic gadgets like, smartphones, tablets, desktop and laptops to do English online lessons. According to Woyo et al, (2020) the Namibian government developed its ICT for education policy in 2005. It is however, surprising to note that 55% of the Grade 11 learners have not been trained to join online lessons after the country introduced ICT policy fifteen years back.

English teachers further opine that some policy makers are misguided or maybe misinformed on aspects of embracing electronic technologies that helps learners and the country at large. Proponents of e-learning argue that it improves the quality of education, students’ performance and engagement levels (Shen & Ho, 2020). This may be true if the relevant stakeholders through the line ministry put hands together to both provide electricity to all households in the country and negotiate with companies to meet parents halfway, for at least every household or child to have a tablet. Internet access must be provided for learners if not free then at a minimal cost for effective online lessons to all schools and all learners in the land of the brave.

In some private schools, the Grade 10 students used to have their online lessons on Google Meet and Zoom meeting platforms and teachers were giving feedback regularly. They also used to write online tests and they proceeded well with their educational calendar. They sat for their examinations face-to-face since they were few in a class (about fifteen learners). They maintained social distance and followed other World Health Organisations regulations on safeguarding against the Covid-19 pandemic. On the other hand, it is essential to note that, in Namibia the private schools who managed

to have online lessons amid Covid-19 were just a drop in the ocean. However, despite the widespread enthusiasm towards e-learning, its use remains in an embryonic stage (Barteit et al. 2019; Eke, 2010; Liu, et al., 2010).

When only 15% of learners have home Wi-Fi, then it means that there is still a lot that is desired for Namibian online lessons in learning English Language amid Covid-19 in Namibian schools. Kaisara and Bwalya (2021) note that, the challenges posed by Covid-19 regarding e-learning during this time are many such as infrastructure and poor access. Barteit et al (2019) note that, e-learning initiatives in Africa is often fragmented and not well planned, seemingly based on the idea that anything is better than nothing strategy. Whilst it is important not to throw away the baby with the bathwater, it is critical for African scholars and policy makers to dissect and analyse the viability of e-learning.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This research concludes that there was a plethora of challenges in the online English lessons amid Covid-19 in Namibian schools. The high school students were affected by the Covid-19 pandemic in a negative way. Most of the students failed to attend online lessons due to a number of challenges like, expensive data bundles, erratic network connections and failing to use the limited electrical gadgets available for their learning. There is need to prepare strategies to mitigate effectively this risk in case of future lockdowns. In addition to that, there is need for teachers to monitor closely student engagement by following up on their attendance, behaviour and also learning progress. The relevant stakeholders through the line ministry should put hands together to both provide electricity to all households in the country and negotiate with companies to meet parents halfway on the cost involved, for at least every household or child to have a tablet. Internet access must be provided for learners if not for free then at a minimal amount for effective online lessons to all schools and all learners in the land of the brave.

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