APPRAISING RESOURCE READINESS FOR INTERNET-MEDIATED ENGLISH LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES DURING COVID-19-NECESSITATED LOCKDOWN

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Abstract

This study was carried out to assess the availability and utilisation of human and material resources for internet-mediated virtual classroom activities by English Language teacher education departments of selected Nigerian universities during the Covid-19 pandemic. The centrality of the English language to Nigerian life and the need to assess how well the experience of that period provided the pre-service teachers with necessary models for the deployment of resources for virtual classroom teaching prompted the study. A simple survey design was used. Two public and two private universities were selected through stratified random sampling. All the 197 English Language teacher education students of the sampled universities constituted the study sample. However, only sixty-four responded to the 20-item questionnaire that was administered via the google forms platform. The instrument had earlier been piloted and yielded 91.7 Cronbach alpha reliability. The obtained data were analysed using percentages and charts to answer six research questions. The findings show that lack of prior exposure to online classrooms hindered the faculty members' and their students' coordination. Inadequacy and non-affordability of Internet services on campuses and in the students' neighbourhoods hampered the virtual classrooms. The conclusion, therefore is that the virtual classroom programmes were negatively impacted by inadequate readiness of both human and technological resources.
Keywords: Virtual classrooms, teacher education, affordances, digital immigrants, digital natives

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Introduction

The twenty-first Century is indeed characterised by unprecedented knowledge explosion and technological advancement. There is no area of human activities that has not been transformed by a touch of technology that was unimaginable a few years back. The field of language teaching has not been left behind in the deployment of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for amazing ease and tremendous success. The use of ICTs for language teaching and the attendant benefits have, however, not been at the same rate in all countries. Many countries labelled third world, developing or underdeveloped lag behind at varying degrees as regards teaching with technology (Kabir & Kadage, 2017; Salam, et al., 2018).

There is an emerging new normal as a result of the disruption occasioned by the global Covid-19 pandemic. ICTs are now being more widely used in classrooms. However, it is worrisome that some countries do not seem to adequately deploy technology for pedagogy. Students in nations where ICTs are not used for language pedagogy may be deprived of the fun that is possible in language learning. After graduation, their employability at the global level, too, will have been significantly stunted. In an age in which Artificial Intelligence has produced robots that can teach almost any school subject (Sharkey, 2016; Konijn & Hoorn, 2020; Mahdi, et al., 2021), language teachers that would have been transformed into digital natives can stay relevant after robotis have taken over significant portions of language teaching.

It is noteworthy that Covid-19 came on the whole world unannounced and all nations were consequently thrown into confusion for months. This means any similarly unpleasant event can occur at any time sooner than later. Being prepared in as many ways as possible is key. Only countries that had enough technology incorporated into their school instruction were able to mediate challenges posed by the lockdown mandated by the need for social distance and thus continued teaching via virtual platforms (Tadesse & Muluye, 2020; Wang & Huang, 2021). Many unprepared nations were compelled to keep students out of school, without any teaching and learning for months. Such countries, Nigeria inclusive, much later awoke to the reality of the inevitability of virtual schooling and quickly took measures to key into the affordances of the available facilities for online schooling.

The motivation for the current study came from the need to appraise human and material resource deployment in Nigerian universities preparatory for uninterrupted teaching-learning during the disruptive event. The need to ensure that Nigerian undergraduates are being properly inducted to master the use of ICTs for educational purposes like their foreign counterparts also contributed to the decision to carry out the study. It is also worthy of noting that the quality of English Language teacher education in Nigeria is crucial to success in other school subjects because English is the medium of instruction in schools. The study was limited to English Language teacher education programmes of selected Nigerian universities for effective focus. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. Did the selected universities offer online classes to their pre-service English language teachers?
2. Were the English Language teacher educators in the sample adequately prepared human resources for the virtual class modes in the Covid-19 period?
3. Were the sampled English Language teacher education departments sampled equipped with adequate material resources for the virtual class modes in the Covid-19 era?
4. Were the pre-service English Language teachers ready for the virtual class modes in the Covid-19 period?
5. Did the sampled pre-serve English Language teachers have access to adequate material resources at home for the virtual class modes in the Covid-19 era?
6. Does the Nigerian government provide adequate internet-enabled environments for remote learning for its citizens?

Theoretical Framework: The Theory of Affordances

A psychologist named James J. Gibson introduced the Theory of Affordances in an article written in 1977. It states that the physical presence of an object combined with the properties that make it available for effective use constitute its affordances. According to Jones (2003), every object has an intrinsic language and meaning predicated on the opportunities it presents. There are two levels of affordances: the inherent affordances that are not predicated on the understanding of the potential beneficiaries. There is another level of affordances accessible according to the measure of understanding possessed about the object by the prospective beneficiaries.

In relation to the current study, the equipment used for the virtual language classes had latent affordances before the lockdown. The extent to which the affordances were exploited during the lockdown is worthy of investigation. The lockdown occasioned by the pandemic necessitated the exploration of more affordances of the technologies. The maximisation of the affordances at that crucial time was necessarily within the ambit of the participants' understanding of the technologies.

Online Learning in Nigeria

Online education is practiced globally but its awareness and practice in Nigeria, as in some other sub-Saharan countries, are not well pronounced (Muhammad, et al., 2016). Khakata, et al. (2019) identify the factors that influence learning via the Internet as including learners' knowledge and competence with internet technology, the intensity of their eagerness and determination to use the technology, the physical learning environment, and the affordability of access to internet technology. All of the aforementioned are important to this study.

Internet-mediated pedagogy will continue to be a necessity in Nigerian universities post-Covid-19 because of the need to mediate the excruciating effect of oversized and

overcrowded classrooms. The most affected classes are those in which General courses are taught (Williams, et al., 2015). Some of the courses are compulsory for all students. There are also departmental courses that are heavily subscribed. Among them are Language Teacher courses.

Most Nigerian public universities are grossly underfunded. They thus cannot afford to adequately equip their departments for effective online teaching-learning activities (Williams, et al., 2015). This makes an investigation into how the English Language Teacher education departments in the universities fared during the Covid-19 lockdown expedient.

Methodology

The ex post facto type of descriptive survey was carried out. All students in English Language teacher programmes of Nigerian universities constituted the study population. Stratified random sampling was employed to ensure that two public universities and two private universities in the southwestern region of Nigeria participated in the study. The choice of the Southwestern region of Nigeria was predicated upon the fact that the region has been reported to be the most educationally developed from a historical perspective and according to current realities (Arigbabu & Mji, 2004; Mustapha, 2006; Mustapha, 2009; Adelowo, et al., 2016). It is logical to expect the reality of the region to be representative of the best practices in the country. Eventually, the actual sample was made up of only 64 preservice English Language teachers who responded to the Google Form link sent to their official WhatsApp platform in their universities.

The instrument for data collection was a researcher-constructed questionnaire titled **Virtual Learning Assessment Questionnaire (ViLAQ)**. The items in the instrument required pieces of information such as the type of institution (public or private), the duration of the online classes provided, the efficiency of the lecturers' handling of the resources, the difficulties encountered by both students and lecturers, the sources of the difficulties, and whether the difficulties were overcome or not. Copies of the questionnaire were administered to thirty pre-service English Language teachers who were not among the study participants. The SPSS reliability test carried out on the items yielded 91.7 reliability. After modifying two of the items based on the reliability result and further expert advice, the questionnaire was prepared in Google Docs and the link to the document was sent to each concerned department's students' WhatsApp platform with a clear solicitation for all students' responses. The instrument is available at https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1Bdvo7X_cEHP3kWDubt21uan25JK6ou3BZjZeL9mH kSg/edit?pli=1

It was hoped that all the students on each platform would respond to the items because they were all regarded as digital natives who were very comfortable with online activities. In addition, it was reasoned that they would have ample time on their hands to participate because they were indoors most of the time as a result of the general lockdown. It was thus surprising that most of them did not respond despite solicitations from their lecturers.

The statistical tools of percentages and pie charts were used to analyse the obtained data. Item analysis was also employed for the comprehensiveness and exactitude of descriptions. Pie charts were also employed to give a graphic representation of each situation found in the fieldwork. These were used to answer the six research questions.
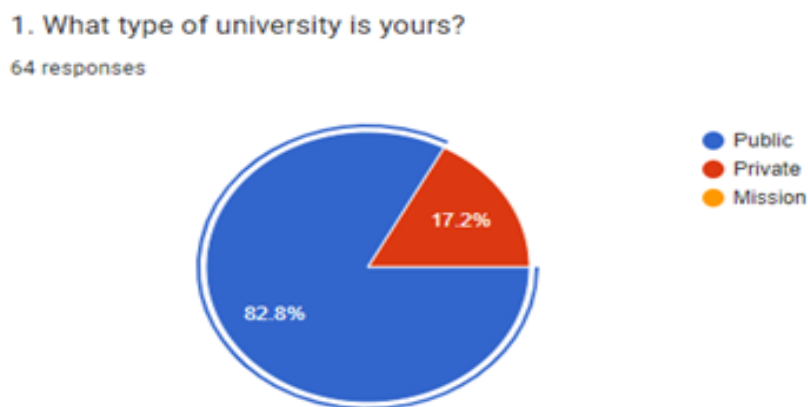
Findings and Discussion

1. What type of university is yours?

64 responses

Fig. 1: Distribution of Participants by University Ownership Type

The participants from public universities notably outnumbered their counterparts from private ones because enrollment in language education programmes in the former is more robust than the latter. This may not be unconnected to carrying capacity differentials. The government is rich enough to have more students accommodated in the programmes offered by its schools than individuals and non-governmental organisations that own the private universities. It is also noteworthy that the public universities had experienced expansion for decades before private provision of university was allowed.

In addition, most Nigerians, including those who live below the United Nations' designated poverty line (Aregbeshola, & Khan, 2018), can barely afford public university education for their children.. Most parents who can afford private university education would rather pay for more lucrative jobs that attract greater social prestige than language teacher education. It can thus be reasonably concluded that the participant statistics are representative of actual enrollment according to the public-private-university-ownership dichotomy.

Research Question 1: Did the selected universities offer online classes to their pre-service English language teachers

2. Did your university offer online teaching during COVID'19 pandemic?
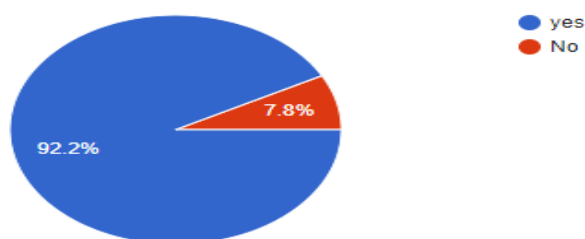
64 responses

Fig. 2: Provision of Online Teaching

Fig. 2 shows that the selected Nigerian universities made use of the virtual mode of classes for their students in the English Language teacher education programmes. That 7% of the sample reported otherwise, however, raises a number of questions. After all, their fellow students in the same sample asserted that they were exposed to online classes. It is probable that their denial of the provision of online class simply meant they did not regard what they were offered adequate.

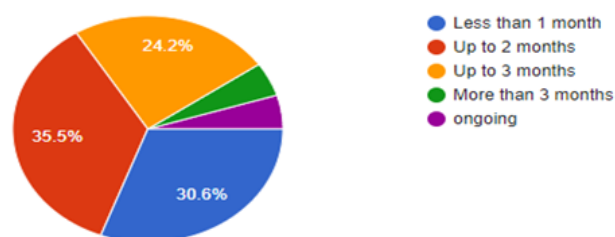3. How long did the online classes last?

62 responses

Fig. 3: Duration of the Online Teaching

In Fig 3, only 30% of the respondents stated that the online option of classroom interaction lasted less than one month and 35% reported about two months. This has serious implications. It indicates that the institutions did make efforts the early enough during the seven-month lockdown to offer online classes. This implies that the concerned departments and faculties were caught unawares by the technical demands of the new realities. This would not have been the case if some degrees of exploitation of the virtual modes had been the practice before the pandemic. The answer to Research Question 1, however, is that the selected universities offered virtual classroom opportunities to their English Language teacher education students to some extent.

Research Question 2: Were the English Language teacher educators in the sample adequately prepared human resources for the virtual class modes in the Covid-19 period?

9. How often were the challenges caused by your lecturers' obvious unfamiliarity with the online platform?
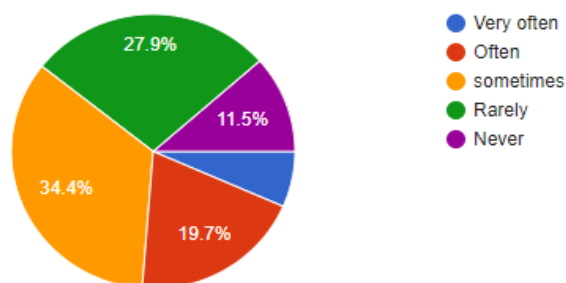
61 responses

Fig.4: Lecturers' ICT (In)competence

In Figure 4, a much overwhelming percentage of the respondents identify lecturers' unfamiliarity with the online platforms as a contributor to the challenges faced. This is a clear indication that among the human resources needed for a smooth and fruitful execution of ICT-driven English Language teacher education programmes, lecturers in the sampled universities were significantly inadequately prepared.

10. What percentage of your lecturers had problems manipulating the chosen online platform?
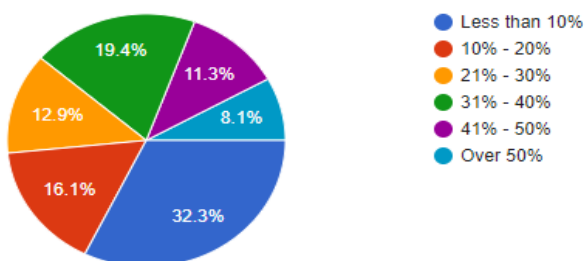
62 responses

Fig. 5: Lecturer-ICT-Competence Ratio

Figure 5 shows that, according to the students' assessment, all the lecturers had initial problems manipulating the platforms chosen for language instruction. Similarly, 66% of teachers that participated in the study carried out by Ebohon, et al. (2021) admitted that

they had difficulties with an online assessment of their students' performance. This is evidence of lack of individual preparation on the part of the lecturers. The universities cannot be exonerated, either. With faculties specialised in technologies, the universities ought to have trained all staff members, academic and non-academic, to handle ICTs fairly well before the unexpected happened.
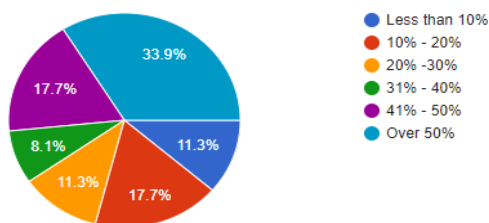

Fig. 6: Lecturer-Recovery Rate

The responses to the item in Figure 6 show that as the virtual classes continued, some of the lecturers seemed to be getting a better grasp of the facilities. A total of 29% (17.7% and 11.3%) of the participants observed that not more than 30% of the lecturers overcame their initial problems with the online teaching resources. Only 33.9% of the students indicated that over 50% of the lecturers overcame their difficulties with handling the online facilities.

The answer to Research Question 2, therefore is that the English Language teacher educators in the sample were not adequately prepared human resources for the virtual class modes in the Covid-19 period

Research Question 3: Were the sampled English Language teacher education departments sampled equipped with adequate material resources for the virtual class modes in the Covid-19 era?
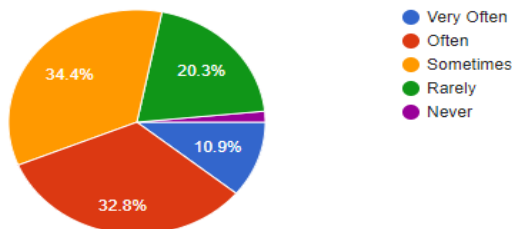

Fig. 7: Assessment of Internet Strength from the Sides of the Universities

In Fig. 7, a total 42.8% of the respondents (10% as very often and 32.8% as often) recognised network failure from their universities' servers as majorly responsible for unstable connection with their online classes. Another 34.4% reported that the failure was sometimes caused by failure of the universities' servers. An insignificant 1.6% asserted that their university servers' faults were not responsible for the lapses encountered. This is a pointer to the widespread conviction among the students that their universities' servers were not adequately positioned for effective online lesson deliveries before the outbreak of the pandemic. The preparatory efforts made for virtual lesson delivery were inadequate as a result of the stampede that eventually became inevitable in the heat of the impact of the global lockdown. The various faculties offering English Language teacher education have not adequately responded positively to the technological, economic and operational feasibility observed by Palvia, et al. (2018) as a necessary consideration for proper implementation of online teaching and learning.

The answer to Research Question 3 is that the sampled English Language teacher education departments were not equipped with adequate material resources for the virtual class modes in the Covid-19 period. It is worrisome that the educational institutions have failed to maximally utilise the digital natives' familiarity with digital facilities. They cannot cope with the demands of the population to which Ball, et al. (2019, p.1167) refer as "physical natives" and has also been labeled "digital immigrants" (Ball, et al., 2019, p.1167) because they are significantly deficient in ICT skills.

Research Question 4: Were the pre-service English Language teachers ready for the virtual class modes in the Covid-19 period?
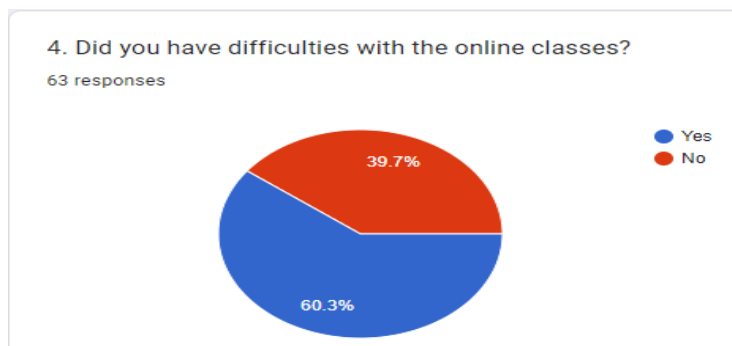

Fig. 8: The Pre-service Teachers' Preparedness

The undergraduate population belongs to the generation referred to as "the digital natives" (Kesharwani, 2020) as a result of masterly handling of and addiction to digital communication gadgets. Fig. 8 shows that 60.3% of the sample belonging to this same generation confessed that they had difficulties with their online classes. This portrays a gross lack of provision for maximal utilisation of the students' technology manipulation skills for educational enterprises. It becomes pertinent at this juncture to probe into the factors that underlie the challenges.

It has been observed that the Netizens (Internet Citizens, meaning people who live more on the Internet) use the Internet for, among other activities, keeping up-to-date about sports scores, reading jokes, and social networking. They are, however, incompetent in how to use the facilities for personal development (Pearce & Rice, 2017). One of the findings from a study carried out by Kirschner and De Bruyckere (2017) with scientific proof debunks the idea of the young generation being digital natives (people whose acquired nature it is to use digital technologies for almost all things) and multitaskers as a mere myth.

8. How often did you encounter difficulties from your lack of familiarity with the online platform chosen by your university/lecturers?

64 responses

- Very Often
- Often
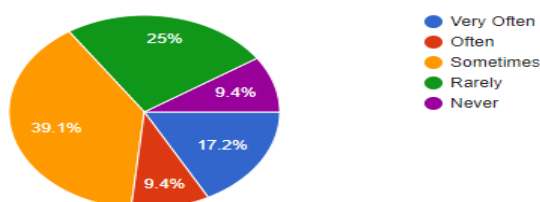- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

Fig. 9: Frequencies of the Pre-service Teachers' ICT-Incompetence Interference

In Figure 9, the responses show that only 9.4% of the participants claim they never encountered difficulties induced by lack of familiarity with the online platforms chosen by their universities or lecturers. All the 95.6% others encountered such difficulties at frequencies described as very often (17.2%), often (9.4%), sometimes (39.1%) and rarely (17.2%). All these further lend credence to the idea that they must have been paying zero attention to the provision of resources for virtual lesson delivery, training of both staff and students for their educational uses and actual deployment of the facilities.

13. What percentage of your fellow students initially had problems manipulating the chosen online platform?

62 responses

- Less than 10%
- 10% - 20%
- 21% - 30%
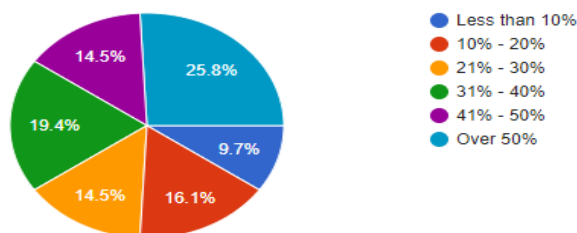- 31% - 40%
- 41% - 50%
- Over 50%

Fig. 10: Population Size of Pre-service Teachers with ICT Deficiencies

According to Figure 10, all the students experienced initial difficulties manipulating the chosen online platforms for interaction. It should be surprising that members of the generation variously described as "Netizens", "digital natives", "Net generation", and "millennials" (Judd, 2018) could find it difficult to learn with technology. However, a

critical probe into what sort of activities the "Netizens" indulge in when they are online will be quite revealing. They had been dexterous handlers of ICTs but only for fun activities and not educational activities. Their schools had failed to harness and give beneficial direction to the skills they had acquired without any assistance from the schools. The strong advocacy by Sarkar, Ford and Manzo (2017) that pedagogies should be specifically tailored towards exploring, exploiting and boosting the potentials of this special generation for maximal educational outputs is yet to be heeded.
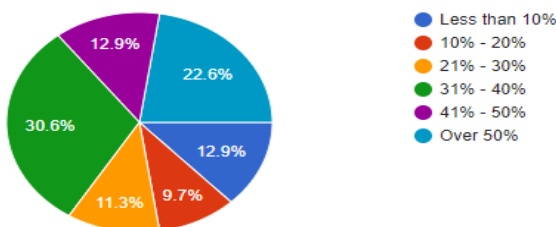

Fig. 11: Pre-service Teachers' Recovery Rate from the ICT Incompetence

Figure 11 shows that not all the students overcame the difficulties with the digital learning platforms half-way. This lends credence to the submission by Judd (2018) that the nomenclatures that hype the young generation's ICT proficiency are waning in acceptance and being subjected to the scrutiny that progressively debunk them. One of the implications of this is that those that failed to outgrow the challenges were not able to make enough out of the online learning provisions made by their universities.

The answer to Research Question 4 is that the pre-service English Language teachers in the sample were not adequately ready for the virtual class modes in the Covid-19 period?

Research Question 5: Did the sampled pre-serve English Language teachers have access to adequate material resources at home for the virtual class modes in the Covid-19 era?
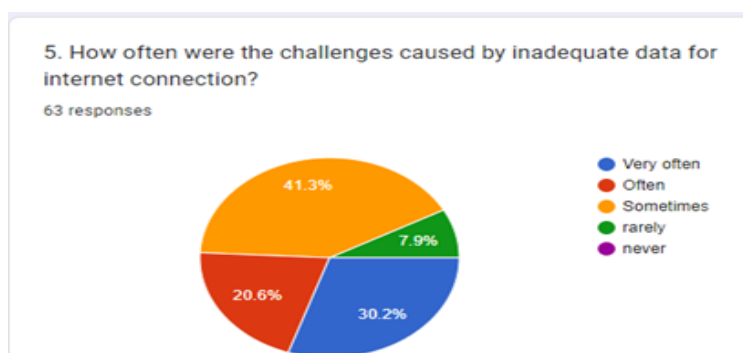

Fig. 12: Internet Data Availability in the Pre-service Teachers' Homes

According to Figure 12, inadequate data for internet access contributed much to the irregularities experienced by the students during the online schooling period. The inadequate data could take the form of the prohibitive cost, epileptic functionality of the network, or even sometimes non-availability of network (Adeoye, et al., 2020). Epileptic supply of electricity, too, is a bane of educational use of the Internet in Nigeria (Azubuike, et al., 2021).
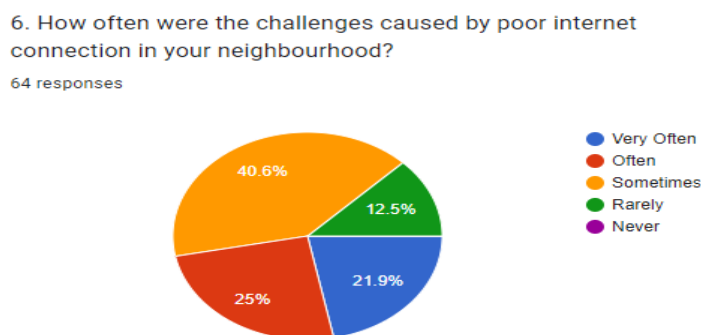

Fig. 13: Internet Service Quality in the Pre-service Teachers' Neighbourhoods

Figure 13 shows that all the participants indicated inadequate internet access in their neighbourhoods as a major source of challenge. A total of 92.1% described the frequencies of their experience of internet access data shortage as problematic (very often: 30.2% + Often: 20.6% + Sometimes: 41.3%). This is an indicator of government's communications regulatory organs' failure to ensure cheap internet access as well as harsh economic policies that impoverish the citizenry.

Despite the exorbitant amounts charged to homes for internet access, the network providers disappointed the students with weak connections, epileptic connections and other technical failures. This is similar to a finding by Ebohon, et al. (2021) that over 50% of the student respondents reported that they had Internet connection problems. Nigeria is reputed to be the largest market for mobile devices in Africa and the tenth in the whole world but also one of the countries with the poorest internet connection (Olutola & Olatoye, 2015; Kabir & Kadage, 2017).

The answer to Research Question 5 is thus that the sampled pre-serve English Language teachers did not have access to adequate material resources at home for the virtual class modes in the Covid-19 era. They were, therefore, fit to be described as adequately prepared human resources for Internet-based remote language teaching and learning. This is because of their inhibitive home environment.

Research Question 6: Does the Nigerian government provide adequately internet-enabled environments for remote learning for its citizens?
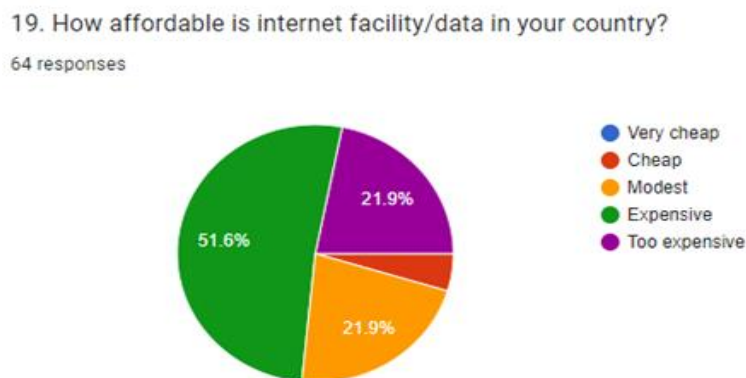

Fig. 14: Internet Service Affordability in Nigeria
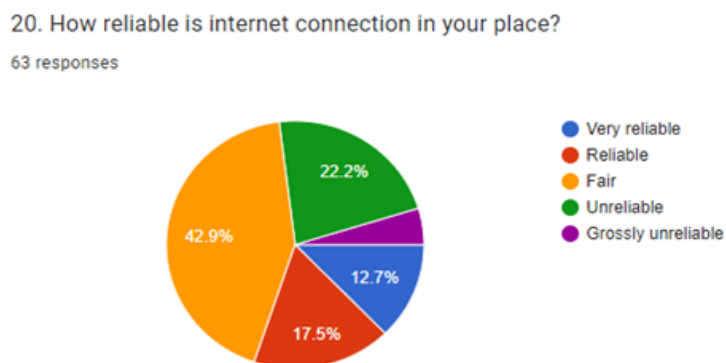

Fig. 15: Reliability of Internet Connection in the Pre-service Teachers' Neighbourhoods

The answer to Research Question 6, as shown in Figures 14 and 15 is that the Nigerian government provides adequately internet-enabled environments for remote learning for its citizens during the Covid-19-occasioned lockdown. From Figure 19, only 4.6% of the participants described internet facilities in their country as cheap. A total of 95.4% rated it at different levels of expensiveness. In fact, 21.9% of them tagged it as too expensive. This made regular participation in online classes highly prohibitive to Nigerian undergraduates, especially those enrolled in public universities, most of whose parents are not very financially capable. If online education is going to be the norm by 2025 as predicted by Palvia, et al (2018), it means Nigerian governments and educational institutions have to move at a pace faster than other countries to measure up. Olutola and

Olatoye (2015) thus describe the need to equip all Nigerian universities with ICT facilities as urgent.

In Figure 15, a total of 55.6% of the respondents indicated that they enjoyed reliable internet connection at home (12.7% very reliable and 42.9% reliable). With unreliable Internet connection in the students' neighbourhoods, participation in online classes, too, becomes grossly uncertain. This is a reflection of the national government's failure to provide necessary infrastructures for the citizenry. World Bank Group (2016) thus pleads with governments of world countries to make internet connection abundantly available in their domains.

The impediments to the full integration of ICTs into English Language education and English Language teacher education are categorised as intrinsic and extrinsic. The extrinsic include lack of policy and planning, lack of technical support, dearth of funds/cost of ICT infrastructure, electricity/Internet issues, and curricula/language issues while the intrinsic include lack of time, lack of confidence (knowledge and skills), resistance to change/teachers' attitude and beliefs, and lack of accessibility (Salam, et al., 2018). The analysis of the data obtained during this study indicates that the challenges encountered at both individual and institutional levels by the sampled pre-service English Language teachers with virtual classroom activities during the covid-19 were both intrinsic and extrinsic.

It is noteworthy that most teachers teach the way they were taught (Hopper, 2000). English Language teachers who are taught without the level of utilisation of modern technology being deployed in other countries may not be able to compete favourably with their counterparts globally. They will be grossly deficient in the use of technology to facilitate their pedagogic endeavours because they had no model to follow.

Conclusion

It is clear from the findings of this study that a lot needs to be done if English Language teacher education in Nigeria is to be made seamless through the use of internet-powered remote learning in the post-Covid-19 era. There is gross inadequacy of necessary human and material resources in the education system and the general home environments of the pre-service English Language teachers are characterised by erratic internet connection. Internet facilities are also mostly unaffordable to many of the pre-service teachers. All these indicate that English Language teacher education in Nigeria is not yet fully well positioned for the new normal that is virtual education.

Recommendations
1. The ministries of education at the federal and state levels should equip their English Language teacher education programmes with enough material resources for maximum deployment of educational technologies required for virtual learning;

2. There should be frequent skill enhancement opportunities for the teacher educators to master the use of various technologies in discharging their pedagogic duties;

3. The Nigerian government should encourage massive importation of materials for internet connectivity through specially reduced import duties and other relaxed conditions;

4. Through proper legislation and strict implementation, internet service providers should be made to run services that can compare favourably with those obtainable in the so-called developed nations of the world, and at reasonable charges;

5. The schools where the teachers are being prepared to work, too, should be technology-enabled to facilitate continued practice of what they have learned at university; and

6. Public-private partnerships should be encouraged by Government towards technology-rich environments for English Language teacher education in Nigeria because the government cannot achieve it unaided.

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