



COVID-19 Language Classrooms: Not All Gloom and Doom

by [Okon Effiong](#)

We have spent the past 25 months talking about, writing about, reading about, and listening to stories about COVID-19 and related topics. Though the virus's dark clouds are still hanging in many language classrooms in different parts of the world, many resilient classrooms are restoring normalcy or near normalcy.

The new era the virus has heralded in prompts teachers worldwide to reinvent themselves in order to perform their primary role of supporting the learners. This adaptation and ability to perform has been in varying degrees and largely dependent on institutional and governmental support. For some, there are classrooms with high-tech bells and whistles, but for many, especially those with desks and chairs only, it is the "same old same old" story. Many of us are familiar with tech terms such as Zoom, Teams, Webex, Blackboard, Schoology, Google Classroom, LearnDash, and D2L Brightspace, but, unsurprisingly, these technologies are still unknown to millions of teachers in different teaching contexts.

The disparity highlighted by the World Health Organization (WHO) in [the distribution of COVID-19 vaccine](#) globally mirrors language classrooms worldwide as far as tech-supported learning is concerned. It would not be preposterous to say that technological disparity, or disparity of any kind, is a function of economic disparity. In the height of the pandemic, several governments shut down schools in different parts of the world for periods ranging from 1 month to 1 year or more, but as the pandemic abated, schools resumed in some regions of the world either virtually or physically. The Nigerian school system was shut down for 1 year, except for some private tertiary institutions with the technological capability to offer online classes. There were classes held on television for some city dwellers who could afford the electricity to power their TV sets, but millions of school children could not avail themselves of this option. This was a price paid by many learners and teachers for the digital divide, especially in economically deprived countries. According to [Human Rights Watch](#), the economic effect of the lockdown drove many African school children into street hawking to augment their family income, and learning suffered as a consequence.

Utilizing Technology in Varying Contexts

The pandemic has created opportunities for advocacy in different parts of the world. It was an opportunity for teachers to explore the repertoire of strategies and tactics available that would

facilitate teaching and professional development in the face of lockdown or meltdown of the educational system. Rather than resign themselves to failure, teachers became creative with the limited tech tools at their disposal and were able to perform their teaching duties with very limited resources. [Facebook](#) and other social media platforms were used to promote learning in the low-tech regions. In my teaching context, the platform of choice was [Blackboard Learn Ultra](#), and I was able to support my learners effectively to navigate this difficult period.

I am fortunate to teach at an institution where there is state of the art technological infrastructural support. At the onset of the pandemic, my institution immediately swung into action by offering training sessions to faculty members and updating the tech platform to accommodate the demands of online teaching. Within weeks, faculty members became conversant with the challenges of online teaching and were able to address them with the structured support provided by the university. Suddenly, we were all equipped with upgraded IT skills for effective online teaching, and I can claim to be more tech-savvy now than I was before the pandemic.

Classrooms the world round found themselves, during the pandemic, utilizing whatever technology they had access to in order to reach their students. These classroom technologies persist, even as we begin to return to that state of near normalcy. If we link language learning permanently and intricately to technology, it will bring up many questions related to equity:

- If the types of technology that were employed during the pandemic become the key determinants of successful language learning, do we need different parameters to measure language learning in different parts of the world?
- What are the core values for tech-enhanced language learning?
- Do these core values compare with the core values of the pre-COVID teaching approaches typical of low-tech contexts?

Changes in Professional Development

Language teacher associations were active in offering online professional development opportunities as a way of supporting teachers in different parts of the world. As face-to-face (F2F) events became impossible, many in some contexts relied on limited and mostly obsolete tech resources to remain active. Despite missing the personal touch of F2F conferences and symposia, the virtual versions offer more flexibility and allow for greater global participation. Basic tech tools, such as [WhatsApp](#) or [Telegram](#), became major modes to deliver seminars and conferences; tools like Zoom or Teams require data packages that are beyond the means of an average teacher in Africa and many similar regions of the world, so WhatsApp and Telegram became the answer to this economic challenge.

Throughout the pandemic, we witnessed a myriad of virtual webinars that has made it possible for many teachers in different regions of the world to avail themselves of professional development opportunities. My institution hosted two virtual conferences that attracted participation from more than 50 countries and we were able to reach a much wider global audience—more than 7,500—compared to our F2F events that drew 500 participants.

The various interest sections and professional learning networks of [TESOL International Association](#) rose to the challenge and supported teachers worldwide with webinars. TESOL's 2020 and 2021 Conventions were virtual, and the [2022 Convention](#) was hybrid, thus giving those who couldn't travel the opportunity to attend the event. In another example, [Africa ELTA](#) adopted WhatsApp as their conference tech platform, and this is similar to what others in similar challenging situations use.

The New Role of the Language Teacher

In addition to forever altering the way we provide and receive professional development, the pandemic has effectively changed the role of the teacher beyond what it used to be. We have become health advisors and counsellors to not only our family members but to our students, learning to empathize more. The pandemic also prompted many institutions to upskill their staff and expand their capabilities.

Additionally, with gradual easing of pandemic restrictions comes [HyFlex teaching](#), in which teachers must deal with learners who are physically present in class and those that are digitally connected to the same lesson. With only F2F teaching, there is a greater likelihood of teachers deploying technology more in lessons as a consequence of virtual teaching.

Global economic disparities have put many at a disadvantage, and this imbalance will certainly affect how teachers approach their duties. These teachers will almost certainly have more challenging responsibilities than those in tech-enabled teaching contexts.

Some Unforeseen Benefits

It is not all gloom and doom. To begin with, there were nonacademic benefits. For example, digitalization of existing assessment and feedback systems may lead to paperless teaching and learning, which would be welcome by environmentalists. Virtual teaching eliminates transportation, thus saving on fuel. During the pandemic, I was filling my gas tank every 6 weeks as opposed to weekly prepandemic filling. There was less laundry because teachers could be top-half formal and bottom-half casual in their dress code, and teachers could be ready for classes in fewer than 5 minutes.

Language teacher associations have been galvanized into providing virtual professional development events for their members, and teachers who had less inclination to associate with such associations had a reason to join to seek ways of meeting the challenges of teaching in the pandemic. Educators around the world have gained digital access to professional development content they didn't have access to before.

As my village elders would say, "Some evil[s] are not necessarily evil." The pandemic had some devastating effects on the health of the populace, but it also afforded opportunities for advocacy and professional development for many practitioners in our field. The virus may not go away soon, and we language teachers should be ready to evolve as the need arises.

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