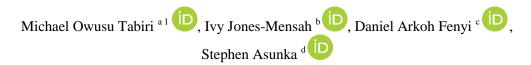


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Challenges of online learning of English/French language in higher education in Ghana



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Abstract

This study investigated the challenges that learners of English and French encountered during their participation in online language learning in a university in Ghana. The study adopted a quantitative survey approach by administering online questionnaire to undergraduate students at the university and analysing the data using descriptive statistics.150 students participated in the study. The results indicate that majority of the students generally feel that online language learning is bedeviled with a lot of challenges, notably technology availability, accessibility, and affordability, as well as the lack of capacity on the part of language instructors to effectively deliver in their online teaching activities. The study further discusses students' opinions and experiences with the objective of determining the prospects of online language learning within the Ghanaian tertiary education context. Based on the findings, some pragmatic pedagogical measures like migrating teaching and learning activities from basic to tertiary levels to full online teaching and learning of all subjects and courses and creating a technological fund with the intention of mobilising funds to empower every home technologically, were proposed to stakeholders to enable them to minimise the challenges of online learning in Ghana.

Keywords: Online language learning; Ghanaian Universities; Student Experiences; English language; French language

1. Introduction

All schools from basic to the tertiary levels in Ghana were closed due to the outbreak of Corona virus pandemic. It was for this reason that the Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the Ministry of Communication, was tasked to roll out distance learning programmes at all levels in the country (University World News, 2020; Fenyi, Andoh & Awukuvi, 2020). It is an indisputable fact that, the adoption of online learning and teaching is associated with so many difficulties or challenges, particularly, when it comes to teaching/learning of English or French, in almost every developing

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country (Fenyi et al, 2020; Tabiri, 2017). It is against this background that the researchers found it expedient to embark on this study with the aim of finding out learners' difficulties with online learning during the period of the Corona virus pandemic. In other words, this research work was undertaken with the aim of identifying students' online learning challenges when it comes to either teaching/learning English or French. Not only that, but the study also seeks to find and propose solutions that could help to overcome those difficulties in online language (s) learning in higher education in Ghana.

Online teaching/learning can either be a 100% delivery of courses or lessons online without any face-to-face teaching/learning of the course content or a hybrid course delivery where there is a combination of offline and online methods or mode of lessons' delivery (Chenoweth, Ushida & Murday, 2006).

Even though technology saves time and energy, and that a learner can learn English or French lessons through the internet without the need of travelling and without the need of leaving home (Dangi, 2019). With strong internet connectivity, students can learn either English or French anywhere at any time and whenever in a very flexible way. However, technical challenges or problems that are usually associated with the adoption of full online learning and teaching cannot be overemphasized.

1.1. Problem Statement

"For some time now, virtual schools have become an alternative to popular traditional, brick and mortar schools and advocates promote the former as a way for kids to complete lessons at their own pace in almost any location" (Daily Graphic, page 7, Tuesday, June 9, 2020).

However, it is clear from the available data that developing countries have a great challenge of internet accessibility and poor internet connectivity (Tabiri, 2021; Fenyi et al, 2020; Tabiri, 2017). It is true that, amidst the period of the covid'19 pandemic, technology is now the best option for teaching and learning. But the problems that technology poses to students cannot be overemphasised. For instance, in an economy that has not been able to provide even stable or constant electricity for all parts of the country, and where only a privileged few have access to the internet, the objective of getting school children to complete schoolwork at their own pace and from remote places will be problematic.

It is informative and revealing to know that even developed countries can pay dearly if proper precautionary measures are not adhered to with respect to the corona virus pandemic. The following quotation stresses the need not to encourage face-to-face schools due to Corona virus pandemic:

"Just one week after a third of French school children went back to school in an easing of the Coronavirus lockdown, there has been a worrying flare-up of about 70 COVID-19 cases linked to schools, the government said on Monday". (Thomas Adamson, May 18, 2020)

The above quotation depicts that an easing or lifting of a ban on public gatherings particularly reopening of schools led to a perturbing increase of COVID-19 pandemic cases even in a developed country like France. Considering the havoc and threatening repercussions of Coronavirus pandemic, it has become highly crucial for all educational institutions worldwide to adopt online teaching and learning to the detriment of either face-to-face or hybrid method of teaching and learning globally (Chenoweth, Ushida, & Murday, 2006).

1.2. Objectives of the study

The main objective of the study was to find out the challenges that learners of English/French typically experience when they participate in online learning in Ghana especially in the wake of the Corona virus pandemic.

The following specific objectives guided this study:

- 1. To determine the factors influencing the effectiveness of online language learning within the Ghanaian tertiary education context from the student perspective.
- 2. To establish the prospects of online language learning in a Ghanaian university based on students' self-reported opinions and experiences.
 - 3. To propose some pedagogical measures to minimise students' online learning difficulties.

1.3. Research questions

The following questions guided the study:

- 1. Why do students of English (L2) and French (L3) find it difficult to learn online?
- 2. What are the challenges that the students of English (L2) and French (L3) encounter in online learning?
- 3. What are the pedagogical measures that should be taken to minimise students' online learning difficulties?

2. Literature Review

The role of Information Communication Technology (ICT) in the 21st Century educational set up cannot be overemphasised. Its relevance in the teaching/learning process in general is crucial and its application in the teaching and learning of English is imperative. This is essentially associated with the acquisition and proficiency of the language at different levels and for different purposes (Ntongieh, 2016). The following quotation lays emphasis on the importance of technology following the outbreak of Corona virus pandemic:

"All universities, Senior High Schools and basic schools, public and private schools will be closed Monday, March 16, 2020, till further notice. The Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the Ministry of Communication, has been tasked to roll out distance learning programmes". (President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, 2020).

The above directive of the President of the Republic of Ghana depicts how serious the situation became. That is to say that for the President to be compelled to close all schools and universities both public and private institutions, because of a pandemic —Coronavirus, is not out of place. Also, following the closure of schools almost everywhere, UNESCO recommended the use of distance learning programmes and open educational applications and platforms that schools and teachers can use to reach learners remotely and limit the disruption of education (UNESCO, March 2020). Webinar has therefore become the best option for online learning. Webinar is an interactive seminar conducted via the World Wide Web (Your Dictionary, 2020). Usually a live presentation, lecture or workshop that happens in real time as users participate through chatting, video-chatting, file-sharing, or asking questions with a microphone (Your Dictionary, 2020). Webinars are more helpful in learning languages where there is a strong availability of internet. According to Madhavi (2010), communicative method for learning languages combines extensively, high-quality content with flexible and interactive multimedia technology. In other words, the emergence of Technology in

Didactics (TD) encourages more active participation of learners (andragogy) thereby minimizing teacher centredness in teaching and learning.

It is even evident from daily usage of internet that, English language is the highest language used as of Monday, June 29, 2020 (Statista statistics, 2020).

The English language has 25.3% of internet users worldwide. As all subjects are taught in English in Ghana except French language, it buttresses the fact that even non teachers or lecturers of English use English online to deliver their respective courses every day due to the closure of face-to-face schools because of Coronavirus pandemic. Again, Internet World Stats (2020) gives a vivid description of top ten languages used in the web with English language leading which emphasises that the highest language used globally is English.

According to Alscher (2020), webinars have a unique set of challenges, but technical issues are universal across industries, activities, and people around the world. Alscher (2020) goes ahead to propose that if one is organizing a webinar, the largest challenge one must prepare to face is the challenge of technical difficulties. Prepare ahead of time by running through a few checks. First, check your environment: internet stability, camera positioning, lighting, and sound should all be tested before launching your webinar at least a day beforehand.

All academic institutions in Ghana have been compelled to stick to online teaching and learning following the directives of the President of the Republic of Ghana. It is for this reason that the researchers found the following statement by the Vice Chancellor of Ghana Communication Technology University highly innovative:

"...on the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic, an emergency meeting between management and key stakeholders held on Monday, 16th March, 2020 decided on the following: "Face-to-face teaching and learning has been suspended. All classes are to be delivered online starting from Monday, 23rd March 2020 until further notice".

The researchers therefore found it necessary to study how Ghana Communication Technology University really adopted online learning fully amidst its challenges.

3. Methodology

The study adopted quantitative method to gather data. The instruments for data collection were observation and questionnaire. The research population was about 300. The purposive sampling strategy was used to select the study site and participants. In other words, the researchers opted for a university that is well noted to be making judicious use of technology in teaching/learning before and during Coronavirus pandemic. The participants were 150 out of 300 first year students at Ghana Communication Technology University who willingly provided responses to the questionnaire, which was sent to them electronically. This technological approach survey was done by creating and sharing a google form or link with participants to enable them to contribute to the study by answering the questionnaire remotely to enable the researchers to arrive at the answers to the research questions in the study. That is to say that the researchers shared the link on the Ghana Communication Technology University Learning Management or online platform and asked all the 300 students who might be willing to answer the questionnaire. The students were given two weeks to contribute to the study.

These student participants had been learning online through a hybrid mode (online and face-to-face simultaneously) before the outbreak of Coronavirus pandemic in Ghana. That is to say that the students at Ghana Communication Technology University had been taught English language and French as well as other courses online since they started pursuing their university education in September 2019 and January 2020. The choice of the researchers is consistent with Parahoo (1997) as

well as Shughenssy and Zechmeister (1990) who also say that a purposive sampling method is usually adopted in the study based on the respondents' ability to provide the useful data. The researchers wanted to find out if the students had been facing some challenges since their university adopted full online learning although they were accustomed to online education even before the outbreak of the pandemic.

4. Results and Discussion

The duty of the researchers here is to analyse the responses of students on adopting full online teaching and learning following the closure of face-to-face schools in most parts of the world in 2020, which Ghana is not an exception. The analyses of students' responses would enable us to appreciate and assess the major challenges that they encounter in online learning and teaching in French or English language so as to ascertain whether adopting hybrid way of teaching language courses (i.e. online and traditional modes of instructions simultaneously) is pedagogically advisable, commendable and crucial in African education institutions particularly in the universities.

From the biodata of the respondents, one can realise that students who are between 18 to 25 years constitute 76.4 per cent representing the highest respondents, thereby emphasising the point that they are youthful and might be well versed in technology and highly innovative when it comes to using technology. The ages of the students are as follows:

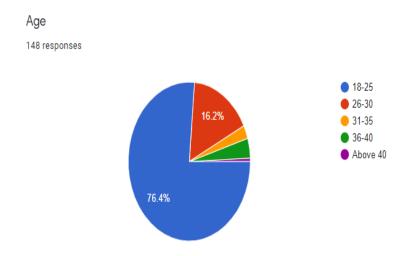


Figure 1. Biodata of the participants

The figure below shows the aspects of language that students of English/French were not convenient or did not like learning online. It was revealed that 43 % of the respondents said that they did not like learning Phonetics and Phonology online.

Which aspects of language that you do not like learning them online?

135 responses

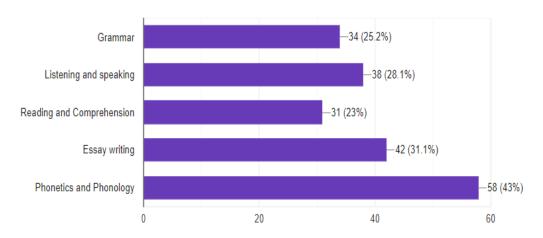


Figure 2. Aspects of language that students do not like learning them online

One can see from the following chart that 38.5 per cent of the students enjoyed all aspects of language online, 35.1 per cent did not like all aspects of language while 26.4 per cent of the respondents were uncertain of their preference.

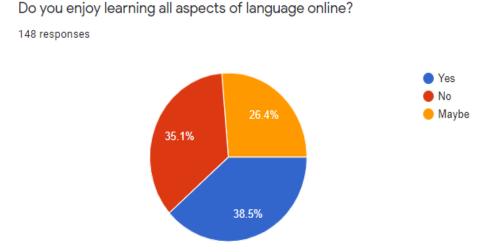


Figure 3. Learning aspects of language online

It is pathetic to know that more than half of the respondents did not have access to internet in their houses. It was found that 51.7% of the students did not have access to internet. One may ask, how can students go online as they do not have easy access to internet in their houses? Our next finding revealed that as students did not have easy access to online, they would definitely be compelled to resort to various means of going online.

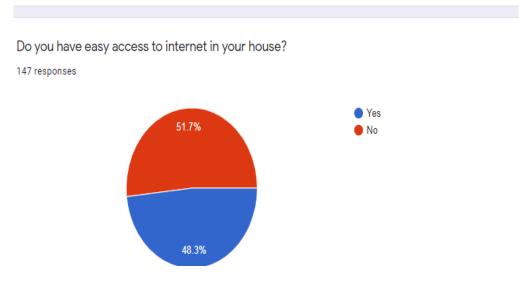


Figure 4. Accessibility of internet at home

Moreover, the students were asked as to whether their parents have a router like turbo-net in their houses, and it was revealing to note that 85 % of them said their parents did not have any form of router. As students' parents do not have any turbo-net, how can they go online to learn when the school has now been shifted to their home? The chart depicting whether students' parents have any form of router is as follows:

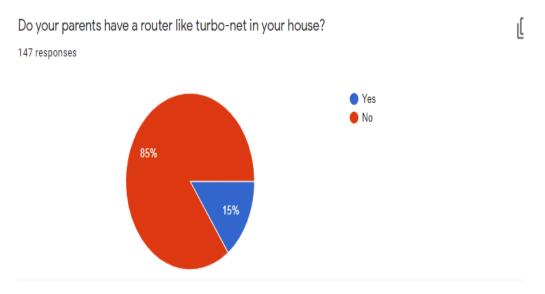


Figure 5. Depicting students who have a turbo-net

Furthermore, the following figure represents various ways that university students had to resort to in order to go online to take part in learning English or pursuing their various programmes of studies. It was revealed that about 77.5% of the students had to go to a place where they could have access to internet connectivity. The detailed results are as follows:

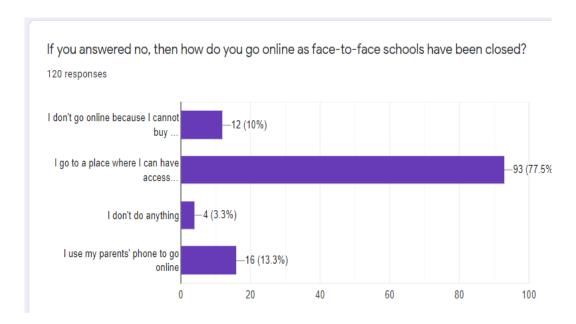


Figure 6. How students go online

Also, it is an undeniable fact that a majority of Ghanaians do not have access to any strong internet connectivity. The respondents were therefore asked to contribute by proposing what the government through the Ministry of Education could do to address the needs of students in remote locations with little or no access to internet connectivity. It was found in the responses that 126 students representing 86.3% proposed that it would be highly expedient for the government to help improved internet accessibility and connectivity without delay nationwide.

What do you think the government through the Ghana Education Service can do to address the needs of students in remote locations with little or no access to internet connectivity?

146 responses

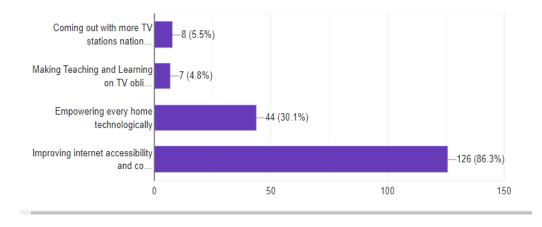


Figure 7. Students' suggestions to improve internet accessibility and connectivity

Again, it was revealed in the study that it is no longer necessary to lay emphasis on furnishing face-to-face schools with computer equipment and internet accessibility but rather there is now an urgent need to empower every home technologically to enable all students to pursue their programmes of studies with ease. It was uncovered in the study that 89.9 per cent of the respondents stressed the need

for the government of Ghana to make internet connectivity easily accessible to every home. The following chart shows the need to empower every home technologically:

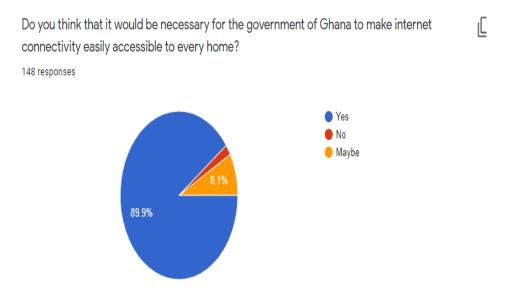


Figure 8. Making internet accessible to every home

It is so surprising to know that even students who attend a university that spearheads the adoption and adaptation of technology in teaching and learning found it difficult sometimes to use online/videoconferencing platforms like Zoom and Teams. One can deduce from the responses that 37.8% of the students found it difficult to use online teaching and learning platforms, 36.5% of them said they did face major difficulty using online teaching and learning platforms while 25.7% of the students were indecisive.

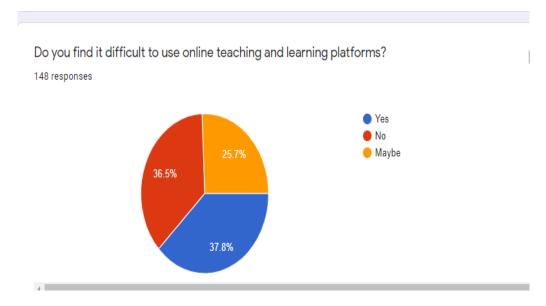


Figure 9. Finding out the difficulties students face in going online

Moreover, it was uncovered in the study that all the students faced some major problems either adopting or adapting fully online learning following the outbreak of the pandemic. The major problems of the students were identified to be no provision of electricity, power outage, inaccessibility of internet, poor internet connectivity as well as the challenge of learners and instructors who might

not be inclined technologically to make judicious use of online teaching and learning platforms in the wake of Corona virus pandemic. The statistics and the analysis of the 150 students' responses depicting their major problems are poor internet connectivity (87.4%), inaccessibility of internet (31.1%), learners and instructors lacking technological skills (23.8%), power outage (18.9%) and no provision of electricity (4.9%). The following chart gives a vivid description of the major problems encountered by students during the full adoption of online teaching and learning at the Ghana Communication Technology University (formerly known as Ghana Technology University College).

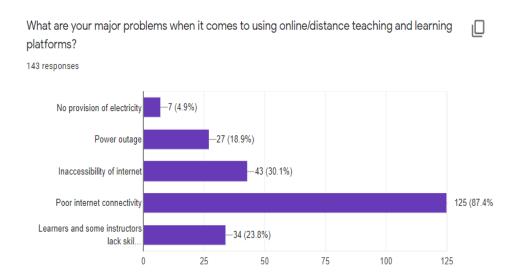


Figure 10. Major problems in online teaching and learning

No wonder about 32.7 % said that they did not like online/distance learning and teaching. The summary of their likes and dislikes are as follows:

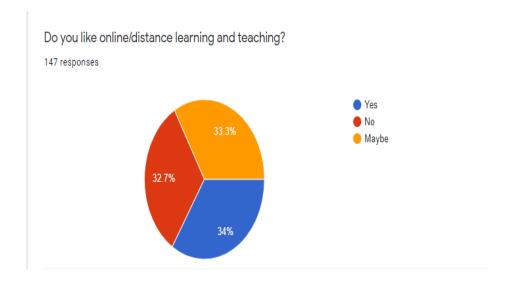


Figure 11. Finding out whether students like online learning

Finally, the students were asked to air their views on the cost of using online learning without any face-to-face contact in teaching and learning. It was revealed in the study that 36.1% of the students strongly agreed that online/distance teaching and learning was extremely expensive while 34% of the students agreed that online learning was extremely expensive and 17.7% of them were indecisive that

online learning was extremely expensive. In short, from the analysis, one can see that 70.1% of the students had realised that online learning was highly exhorbitant and not easily affordable.

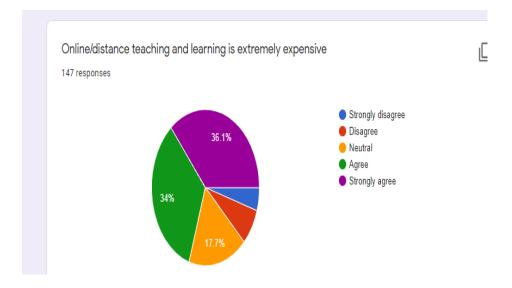


Figure 12. The cost of online learning

From the foregoing analyses and discussions, one can realize that online teaching and learning is pregnant with so many issues especially poor internet connectivity, frequent power outage and inaccessibility of internet in some places in Ghana.

It is an indisputable fact that, even some teachers/lecturers and university students are not comfortable when it comes to using some Learning Management Systems and videoconferencing or teleconferencing platforms like Zoom and Teams, but looking at the current situation worldwide, learners, teachers and lecturers have no option than to succumb to online/distance teaching and learning.

5. Pedagogical Implications of Online Teaching and Learning of Languages in Ghana

Pedagogically and didactically, every language can easily be learnt and mastered after learning its sounds or phonics. It is therefore expedient for teachers and lecturers to whet the interest of English (L2) and French (L3) students in Phonetics and Phonology by making this aspect of the language practical. Where instructors of English (L2) or French (L3) in Ghana themselves find Phonetics and Phonology difficult to teach, they should resort to the adoption of the native speakers of English or French recordings and play the recordings daily for learners to learn the language directly or indirectly from the native speakers, thereby promoting and incorporating applied technology in teaching and learning languages.

What can our leaders do during this educational shift from school to our students' villages? How can the government through the Ghana Education Service address the needs of students in remote locations with little or no access to internet connectivity?

The government's introduction, through the Ghana Education Service, of Distance Learning for Basic Schools on Ghana Learning TV to promote continuous teaching/learning in the wake of Coronavirus is highly commendable (Fenyi et al, 2020; Tabiri, 2020). However, if it is possible, the Parliament should enact or pass a bill to make teaching/learning on both public and private TV stations obligatory from 7 am to 12 noon daily before any programme with the aim of helping children/learners who may not have access to internet in the country to learn (Tabiri, 2020). If this is not done

nationwide, most parents particularly, those who are fond of watching movies and other non-academic programmes will not even encourage their children to take an active participation in distance learning on Ghana Learning TV and Joy Learning Channel. Once Pre-Tertiary Online/Distance Education Bill is promulgated and passed in Ghana, every class/level will be assigned to a particular TV station for all students, learners, pupils as well as instructors will be able to adhere to the curricula with ease. In other words, making teaching and learning compulsory on all TV and FM stations will definitely help to ensure that the academic calendar continue without any disruption. The importance of passing a bill to make teaching and learning on all TV and FM stations nationwide obligatory due to Coronavirus pandemic cannot be overemphasised. In short, promoting online teaching and learning can only become effective when all homes have been empowered technologically with regard to easy accessibility of internet as well as improving connectivity nationwide.

Similarly, Ammanni and Aparanjani (2016) assert that the most efficient medium for teaching is television. The television appeals both to the ears and eyes (Ammanni and Aparanjani, 2016). It is against this background that the researchers believe that it would be necessary to adopt or adapt television and radio learning in Africa, particularly, in Ghana where learners do not have easy access to internet connectivity. According to Ammanni and Aparanjani (2016), radio and television give learners the experience of real world into the classroom (Ammanni and Aparanjani, 2016).

It has been revealed that online teaching and learning is one of the multimedia means of ensuring learners' centredness and active participation in teaching and learning. Also, pedagogically and andragogically, lecture notes or lessons online promote accessibility and repetition of lessons that could avert forgetfulness in learning.

Moreover, all BECE and WASSCE candidates can resort to online teaching/learning instead of attending face-to-face classes. It is all about creating learning management platforms for all the candidates. If creating learning management system immediately for all the candidates may be difficult, because of the financial responsibilities that various stakeholders must shoulder, then parents/guardians' phone numbers can be used to create WhatsApp platforms for all candidates in every school, whereby parents will only allow their wards to use phones during lessons on WhatsApp. In other words, parents/guardians will be required to do WhatsApp registration with their numbers on behalf of their wards and get to know the timetable for each of the subjects on WhatsApp to monitor WhatsApp teaching/learning of their wards. In other words, it is crucial to resort to teaching/learning management platforms or WhatsApp teaching and learning for BECE and WASSCE candidates instead of asking them to go to school amidst the threat of Coronavirus. That is making judicious use of technology in didactics/pedagogy which is one of the precautionary measures against a pandemic-Coronavirus.

In short, is it possible to make online teaching/learning mandatory/obligatory at least at the tertiary level so that no academic institution, particularly, a university will be closed when there is an unforeseen circumstance? It is the anticipation of the researchers that gradually the Government would compel all second cycle and tertiary institutions to opt for online teaching/learning in Ghana.

Moreover, the Ministry of Education and the Ghana Education Service should see how to migrate teaching and learning activities from basic to tertiary levels to full online teaching and learning of all subjects and courses.

It would be expedient for the Ministry of Education and the Ghana Education Service to create a technological fund with the intention of mobilizing funds to empower every home technologically. It is no longer furnishing physical or face-to-face schools with computers, but it is about empowering every home with computers, internet accessibility and improving internet connectivity nationwide. It is

equally necessary for philanthropic people and organisations to start contributing to educational/technological fund.

Also, apart from the numerous existing educational committees, it will not be out of place to set up a technological committee consisting of teachers from basic to the tertiary levels to spearhead how to ensure effective and efficient teaching and learning online (Tabiri, 2020). This is the time for ICT experts in the country to use their attained expertise and knowledge to help all and sundry to make a judicious use of technology in our educational institutions (Tabiri, 2020). This is because, having certificates in ICT without showing any pragmatic or practical competence is a mirage and synonymous with illiteracy in applied technology in education. In short, promoting online teaching and learning can only become effective when all homes have been empowered technologically regarding easy accessibility of internet as well as improving connectivity nationwide.

6. Conclusion

From the foregoing discussions and findings, it would be highly necessary for the government to find means of addressing the challenges that university students encounter in adopting online teaching and learning in Ghana. Without addressing those online challenges in teaching and learning, adopting or adapting online teaching and learning in the country will be a monumental fiasco. If students at the tertiary level, particularly, those who are in a technology university like the Ghana Communication Technology University are facing difficulties in adopting online teaching and learning, what will be the fate of learners in other academic institutions such as from basic to tertiary levels that are not well noted to be spearheading or pioneering applied technology in education? It is therefore incumbent upon educational stakeholders to empower learners technologically in their homes instead of furnishing face-to-face schools technologically. It will be difficult for learners to study from home effectively without being empowered technologically at home.

In this study, the analysis of the data gathered from the 150 students' responses revealed their major challenges with online learning. These problems are poor internet connectivity (87.4%), inaccessibility of internet (31.1%), learners' and instructors' lack of technological skills (23.8%), power outage (18.9%) and no provision of electricity in some villages in Ghana (4.9%).

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APPENDIX

The questionnaire to students learning English and French who took part in the survey for the Online teaching and learning at the Ghana Communication Technology University is as follows:

QUESTIONNAIRE TO STUDENTS LEARNING ENGLISH (L2) OR FRENCH (L3) IN GHANA

Dear Student.

Following the closure of all schools in Ghana due to the outbreak of Coronavirus pandemic, the Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the Ministry of Communication, was tasked to roll out distance learning programmes at all levels in the country. It is an indisputable fact that, the adoption of distance/online learning/teaching is associated with so many difficulties or challenges, particularly, when it comes to teaching/learning of English or French, in almost every developing country.

This is a research work we are undertaking, which aims at identifying students' and teachers' online teaching/learning challenges when it comes to either teaching/learning English or French and seeking to overcome those difficulties in teaching/learning language (s) in Ghana.

You are kindly requested to contribute your views by answering all the following questions. Please be assured that the information given will be treated as confidential.

Part I

Gender: Male () Female ()
Age:
Name of institution/school:
Programme of study:
5. Level/Form/Class:
Part II
1. Do you enjoy learning all aspects of the language online?
a) Yes b) No c) Not really
2. What are some of the aspects of language that you do not like learning them online?
have easy access to internet in your house?
Yes b) No
4. Do your parents have a router like turbonet in your house?

Yes b) No 5. If you answered no, then how do you go online as face-to-face schools have been closed?
6. Do you think that it would be necessary for the government of Ghana to make internet connectivity easily accessible to every home? A. Yes B. No C. It is not necessary 7. What do you think the government through the Ghana Education Service can do to address the needs of students in remote locations with little or no access to internet connectivity?
8. Can teaching and learning on TV be used effectively in remote places where there is no internet accessibility? a) I strongly think so b) Maybe c) I don't think so 9. Do you find it difficult to use online teaching and learning platforms? a) Yes b) No c) Sometimes d) Always 10. What are your major problems when it comes to using online/distance teaching and learning platforms?
11. Do you like online/distance learning and teaching? a) Yes b) No 12. Why do you like online/distance learning and teaching?
13. Online/distance teaching and learning is extremely expensive.

Thank you.