Teaching ESL through SMS: Prospects and Problems in Nigeria
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Abstract

There is a growing call for English as a second language teachers to explore different learning environments and teaching options to spice up the traditional 'boring' English language classes. The onus has been on language teachers to discover these innovative platforms and implement same in their classes. It is against this background that the present study presents the prospects and problems of using the SMS on mobile phones for teaching the English language in Nigeria knowing fully well that at least 15.5 million Nigerians of different ages own at least one mobile phone. The study reveals that most English language teachers do not recognise the cheap, exciting and handy nature of the SMS learning environment. The study also discovers that amongst all the network providers in the country, only MTN provides an SMS based ESL class that is mainly focused on grammar tips. The study examines some problems associated with the SMS learning environment; chief amongst them being the restricted text typing environment of SMS and the inability to take pictures for illustrations. However, the study recommends that despite the short comings, the SMS platform still provides an efficient and cheap learning environment.

Keywords: ESL, SMS, learning environment, mobile learning, problems and prospects

1. Introduction

The English language in Nigeria is mainly learnt in the school environment through the various English language subjects in the primary and secondary schools and the compulsory Use of English course in the first year of the tertiary institution. Some learners also go through other informal forms of learning the language by copying or imitating model speakers through listening to the radio, television; reading newspapers etc. However, these learning environments alone have not been of too much help to Nigerians in their usage and performance of the English language. Akeredolu-Ale (2007, p.232 cited in Alexander, 2014, p. 222) notes the significant decline in the quality of English that is being taught and learned in Nigeria in the following areas: 'the level of competence that Nigerians display with regard to both spoken and written English, the performance of Nigerian students in English language examinations and the importance which Nigerians attach to Good English' and to the acquisition of adequate competence in the use of English.

In 2014, only 31.28% of 529, 425 students had credit in English from available West African Examinations Council's records. The Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination result is also not better, the situation has been continuously poor only 38.68% of 616,370 students that sat for the final secondary school examination in WAEC 2015 in English Language had credit pass in English. Onabamiro (2010) and Osikomaiya (2013) note that students continue to perform very poorly in the subject at both promotion and terminal examinations to the great displeasure of parents, teachers, examiners and policy makers.

This abysmal performance might be connected with what Griffiths (2010) calls the 'dry, uninventive and boring' English language classroom situations in most ESL countries (p.6). In Nigeria for example, most of the English language classes can easily fall into the above description. Most of the teachers do not bring in concepts to enthuse the students being thought. Hypothetical sentences and scenarios are usually used for class examples making the sessions boring and monotonous. Only on a few occasions are plays, internet resources, graphical representations, mobile phones, tablets and other exciting teaching resources used for teaching either in the class or outside the class room situation. These resources have the ability to break the seemingly 'boring' nature of most ESL classes in the country. It is on this basis therefore that the current study intends to unravel the prospects and problems associated with using the short messages (hence, SMS) resource of the mobile phones in teaching ESL in Nigeria either within the class room or

outside the classroom situation.

The study is modelled by the following objectives:

    a)   to establish to what extent the SMS on mobile phones is used for teaching ESL in Nigeria

    b)   to unravel the seemingly bright prospect of using SMS in teaching ESL in Nigeria

    c)   to unravel the likely problems in using SMS in teaching ESL in Nigeria.

In addition, answers shall be sought to the following research questions:

    a)   to what extent is the SMS used for teaching ESL in Nigeria?

    b)   what are the prospects of using SMS for teaching ESL in Nigeria?

    c)   what are the problems of using SMS for teaching ESL in Nigeria?

2. The Use of Mobile Technology in Teaching English: A Review

Ogunduyile (2013) investigates the possibilities of using mobile technology in the teaching and learning of the English language in secondary schools. The data for this study was obtained from a three-week field experiment involving an English language teacher and purposively selected twelve Senior Secondary School II students of t

he Federal University of Technology, Secondary School, Akure. The participants took part in activities involving different digital formats in the teaching and learning processes. The respondents were interviewed to assess their perception and attitude towards this mode of teaching English Language. The study concludes that learning through mobile devices promotes cooperative and collaborative learning through the enhancement of learners' use of authentic English language that would make it possible for them to construct their own knowledge. Though Ogunduyile (2013) presents a study on using mobile devices to teach ESL in Nigeria, it does not specify how the SMS feature of mobile devices can be used for this purpose which is our main objective here. Ogunduyile's study is similar to the report which Aborishade (2009) presents on the use of wiki internet based learning environment to solve the problem of large classes in Nigerian universities. The report concludes that the wiki experience extended the 'classroom' beyond the physical space and engaged students in interactional communication in the second language. Students learnt over time how to source information online and apply them to their present study.

Akpan (2017) studies the ways teachers and students alike can harness the potentials of mobile technology to the benefit of both parties. Based on the discussion in the study, it is recommended that since most students own or have access to cell phones and tirelessly operate them, teachers should properly harness this untiring skill to achieve educational objectives. Parents, teachers and other relevant authorities should educate the youths and students in particular on the dangers of abusing the use of the cell phone. In another study, Mtega, Bernard, Msungu, and Sanare (2012) investigate how mobile phones have been used for teaching and learning purposes in higher learning institutions in Tanzania. Specifically, the study assesses how mobile phones facilitates the teaching and learning process, identifies the mobile phone applications used for teaching and learning, determines the types of learning activities facilitated through mobile phones and assesses the common limitations of m-learning in at Sokoine University of Agriculture (SUA). At the end, Mtega, *et. al.* (2012) recognise that most of the students use android phones which takes a lot in terms of finance to make it an efficient learning tool. From the study, the costs associated with downloading multimedia content limited some students from using phones for learning purposes. More than that, users were forced to use SMART/VISA cards for buying online mobile applications of which most respondents were not aware of. The findings from, Mtega *et al.* (2012) resonates the need to explore cheaper ways of learning through the mobile technology. We must say, at this point, that the SMS remains the cheapest as it does not take much from the users in terms of money.

Rismark, Solvberg and Stenion (2004) in a study attempt to reveal how the mobile phone would be of help to the student in learning. They present as part of their finding that sometimes, students use the mobile phone to view the videos related to what they are about to learn ahead of lectures without further preparation. The mobile phone thus could work as a preparation tool to familiarize the students with the topic without using other study material. Sofowora (2011), in another study explicates that mobile communication devices no doubt impacted education positively and negatively. He is also of the view that Nigeria as a developing country welcomed mobile technology with much excitement but the excitement soon faded out as a result of many problems associated with the use of mobile phone by students in schools. Some of the problems as listed by Soforowa (2011, p. 235) include: 'concern for discipline, examination malpractices and mobile bullying. Research has also shown that some people have become addicted to their phones … they sleep and wake up with it beside them.' This discovery is close to the one made by Ezemenaka (2013) who is of the opinion that the use of mobile phones can lead to students experiencing

withdrawal symptoms typically associated with substance abuse, such as anxiety, insomnia, and depression, when they are without their smartphones and all these are embedded to the cause of academic relapse of students who fall into this category.   The current study equally recognises the negative aspect of mobile learning but notes that the positive side especially with the use of SMS outweighs the negative side. Hence, wishes to explore how best we can get out from it then allow teachers and parents to carry out the advocacy work on the students and children to minimize the negative effects. Also on the negative side of mobile phones and SMS, Odey, Essoh, and Endong (2014) find out that dominant features of vowel deletion, graphones, alphanumeric homophony, punctuation 'errors' and initialization used by students to send text messages usually found their way into their exam answers and essays. The study observes that texting influences students to consciously or unconsciously transfer the pattern used in SMS into formal writing environment like an examination script or a full blown essay. Also, Uzochukwu, Ekwugha and Okafor (2015) do a study on teachers' perception on the use of SMS communication on students' conventional writings. The study finds out that that teachers are aware students use SMS communication because they observe that it filters into their academic writings, particularly in written examinations. The study also identified that the form of SMS language commonly used among students is replacing words with alphabets such as 'U' in place of 'You'. In as much as these studies are valid, they are not in any way negating the present study because our attention is on using SMS as a formal learning environment which is very different from students using the SMS on their own for their private communication purposes.

3. Prospects of SMS for ESL Teaching in Nigerian

Exploring other learning environments is of major interest to educators who wish to tap into the rapid development in technology to see how it can be of greater benefit to learning; especially when the output of the formal learning patterns are failing and the people to be taught look more sophisticated and distracted by technology.   (cf Irina, 2011 & Tomie, 2005) According to Mamudu and Oyewo (2015, p. 66) 'mobile learning has become a major focus in education, has really changed the way people learn and want to learn, the learning environment is gradually shifting from the physical to the virtual…' It is now the task of educators to explore these new virtual worlds and see how much we can tap from it. However, from our review, we see that no study has focused or reported the use of SMS to teach ESL in Nigeria. It means that this virtual resource is not in great use in the country especially in the formal school environment. There are studies though that reported the use of internet mobile resources for students and teachers (cf Adomi, 2006; Aborishade, 2009; Ekamuake & Wishart, 2010). None reported the use of SMS by teachers and students to teach, reinforce teachings already done in classes or for students to ask their teachers questions. Since conventional teachers are not making use of this resource, let us focus on the network providers for language learning SMS packages.

As at today, only the MTN network provider has an SMS package for its subscribers for teaching English. They run this side by side the MTN education bundle which is a more sophisticated and more encompassing package covering other subjects and mainly using data services. For GLO and AIRTEL, our investigation shows that their English classes are online as lessons are sent to the e-mail addresses of the subscribers which is beyond the scope of this paper hence we would not examine their operations as our attention is on using SMS to teach ESL.

The MTN network encourages subscribers to register for learning English through SMS on a monthly fee of ₦50. When a subscriber keys in to this package, MTN would send on a daily basis at least, two lessons that contain sets of correct and incorrect expressions or sentences. An excerpt of 10 of those lessons spanning a three-year period is presented below:

1.   Incorrect: I recommend you to take a long vacation

 Correct: I recommend that you to take a long vacation (22nd of December, 2015)

2.   Incorrect: His temperature went down

 Correct: His temperature came down (4th of January, 2016)

3.   Incorrect: There is seven girls in the class

 Correct: There are seven girls in the class (18th of January, 2016)

4.   Incorrect: Do you like a glass of wine?

 Correct: Would you like a glass of wine? (4th of March, 2016)

5.   Incorrect: I didn't meet nobody

 Correct: I didn't meet anybody (17h of April, 2016)

6.   Incorrect: The police is coming

 Correct: The police are coming (13th of June, 2016)

7.   Incorrect: You speak English good

 Correct: You speak good English (16th of September, 2016)

8.   Incorrect: He became better

 Correct: He got better (20th of October, 2016)

9.   Incorrect: Would you like a drink?

 Correct: Would you like something to drink? (24th of December, 2016)

10. Incorrect: They cooked the dinner themself

 Correct: They cooked the dinner themselves (3rd of January, 2017)

A look at these lessons shows that they are all grammar-based lessons and more or less represent what should and should not be said in the English language. This makes the lessons somewhat prescriptive. In terms of the reality on ground, this is what is obtainable in Nigeria on the use of the SMS in ESL teaching. We do not have at the moment (at least, in the knowledge of the researcher) a situation where lessons taught in the conventional Nigerian English language classes can be reinforced through the SMS to the learners especially when they have left the class. Also, we do not have classes existing in the virtual world of SMS on mobile phones apart from the one being provided by MTN. However, some universities in Nigeria like the Federal University of Technology, Akure combine conventional classroom with to the virtual. Their platforms are the WhatsApp and the Telegram. They do not use the SMS like we are proposing here. In terms of cost of data and accessibility, the SMS platform has an advantage over the others. Data cost in Nigeria is expensive and not too efficient. This can create problems for the users. The SMS goes for as low as ₦4 and can be used in as much as there is cellular network. SMS groups can be created by the teacher where short lessons can be sent to many persons at the same time.

Also, students in such a class could ask questions by sending a reply to the teacher without the knowledge of other members. This would keep the information and the identity of the leaners discrete. This can properly fit in to adult learners of ESL who might find it embarrassing or inconveniencing attending formal classes to improve their use of the language. Also, most adult learners are usually busy during the day that it becomes practically impossible to attend formal classes for ESL. The SMS can be used to relay the lessons to them in an organised manner.

The handy and thrilling nature of mobile phones can create a stimulating an interesting learning situation that is different from the four walls of the classroom. What the student cannot grasp in the class could be reinforced through the SMS platform. Also, the message remains in the phone as such the student can severally go through it again.

Also, there is a possibility of expanding the lessons beyond the grammar lessons of correct and incorrect sentences. This expansion would necessitate the students being told or taught the rules behind the correct forms. Grammar or sentence construction is but just an aspect of the ESL learning situation. The mobile phones come with other features like the voice mail messages which can be used to teach spoken forms such as pronunciations and stress patterns. This can be explored to expand the lessons beyond grammar. Also, punctuation marks and their uses can be taught using the SMS too. Model written short stories can also be sent through the SMS to expose the learners to the written part of the language and the creative tendencies in the language.

The major advantage the SMS has over other mobile phone applications for teaching is that there is no data requirement on the sender and receiver which can in a way scare people especially in this part of the world where data services are not free or readily available and efficient. In as much as there is a cellular network for calls and SMS, the subscribers can get the lessons. This marks a stark contrast between the SMS and another of MTNs services which is the MTN Education. The bundle comes along with a prepaid laptop loaded with contents for children education from the nursery stage to the secondary stage of education. It also comes with a free internet service. The major problem here is that of the cost. The lowest goes for Sixty-three Thousand Naira.   It is very expensive especially for a country like Nigeria where more than 80% leave below the poverty line.

If one compares the MTN education bundle to the SMS system, one would see clearly that the latter is far cheaper. Also, the receiver in this case, the learner need not to pay to get the SMS delivered to his phone rather, the cost is born by the sender. This does not apply to the MTN situation where the learner is asked to pay just ₦50 for a month. If the SMS for ESL teaching is implemented in schools, the schools or the teacher would bear the cost of sending the SMS. Institution can work out how the cost of the SMS can be paid in order not to financially stress the teachers.

Another advantage of this system on the part of the teachers is that a message can be sent to as many as possible at the same time in as much as the lesson applies to them. Also, bulk SMS can be used though it requires the sender using a data service. However, the receiver does not need the data services to receive the message in the mobile phone.

4. Likely Problems of SMS for ESL Teaching

There is no teaching environment without its own problems. The SMS mobile teaching environment has got its own share of problems. The fundamental problem facing the use of SMS for teaching ESL is the alarming level of unawareness that SMS can be uses for such a purpose. Many including teachers of the English language in Nigeria do not know that mobile network providers like the MTN is running a grammar class by sending lessons through the SMS platform to subscribers. One can only make use of what one knows. The onus now lies on ESL experts to promote the SMS learning platform as another learning environment. The SMS platform might not be able to run alone due to the other problems we would still investigate. It can run side by side other virtual learning space and the traditional classroom situations. The SMS can then act as a reinforced learning platform to the others.

The first amongst these problems is the text restricted nature of SMS. The SMS on mobile phones allows you to type a maximum of three pages. The first page of an SMS allows you to type 160 words, the second page allows you to type a maximum of 145 words and the third page can contains 152 words. This brings a total of 450 words. 450 words might not be enough for a lesson but just a small aspect can be communicated from a bigger lesson then subsequent SMS could be sent to complete the former. However, this would lead to another problem which is that of having myriads of messages appearing in the mobile phone SMS inbox. This can on its own create confusion on the part of the students trying to trace which message comes first in the sequence.

Another problem with the SMS platform is its inability to take pictures and other instructive diagrams that would be important for learning. If pictures are imported into the SMS page, it converts to a multimedia message which requires the sender and the receiver to be on data services. We have identified earlier that data services are expensive in Nigeria at the moment. This might discourage users from participating in the learning environment. This problem is related to the inability of the SMS platform to effectively teach all the aspects of the English language. The practical aspect of English phonetics might be difficult to relate through the SMS. However, the voice mail feature of the mobile phone can easily come to the rescue here. The teacher can pair the correct and incorrect voice recording of words commonly pronounced wrongly amongst the learners to serve as a guide to pronunciation. However, the cost of the voice mail is on both the sender and the receiver unlike the conventional SMS platform where the sender (in this case, the teacher) bears the financial burden.

5. Recommendation

Having examined the situation of the SMS for ESL teaching in Nigeria and the antecedent problems, we hereby recommend the following:

   a) that other network providers (GLO, Airtel and 9Mobile) introduce the SMS lessons for ESL on their platform as it would open up their customers to more knowledge of the English language on a cheaper basis unlike the package of sending the lessons to the email address of the subscribers. In the same vain, MTN should expand their scope of lessons beyond the grammar of the language,

   b) that English language teachers adopt the SMS learning environment as a way of clearing the normal boredom which is associated with typical English language classes. If the SMS platform cannot be used on a full scale, it should be used as a reinforcement platform for the traditional classes,

   c) that adult learners of ESL be introduced to the SMS environment as it does not take any of their time, it does not require physical presence and very cheap for them. The SMS for ESL classes would solve the problem of the busy nature of adult learners as they could look at the messages at their leisure time and they can always go back to it.

6. Conclusion

There is an urgent need to spice up ESL classes. One of the means of doing this would be to change the learning environment to create exciting interest in the student. The SMS as a learning platform provides such a change. What we have done in this study is to investigate the possibilities, advantages and difficulties of using the short messaging system (SMS) on mobile phones for English as a second language teaching in Nigeria. The study reveals that most English language teachers do not recognise the cheap, exciting and handy nature of the SMS learning environment. The study also discovers that amongst all the network providers in the country, only MTN provides an SMS based

ESL class that is mainly focused on grammar tips. We also examined some problems associated with the SMS learning environment. Chief amongst them being the restricted text typing environment of SMS and the inability to take pictures for illustrations. However, the study suggests that despite the short comings, the SMS platform still provides an efficient and cheap learning environment. We are giving this suggestion knowing fully well that it is possible that many persons see SMS as analogue or kind of technology that has been overtaken by new innovations like the Whatsaap, Facebook and the others. For a developing country like Nigeria where the poverty level is very high (in the aspect of buying smart phones and devices; and paying for internet services) and access to these forms of technology very rare, it is still expedient at least, for the moment to use the SMS platform.

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