

Teaching And Learning Sepedi Using Blackboard: Challenges And Opportunities In The Age Of Covid-19 And Beyond

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ABSTRACT

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic has shifted the system of teaching and learning from traditional face-to-face to online in South African and global institutions of higher learning. This online teaching and learning system seem to have brought some greater challenges and opportunities. This study therefore sought to investigate and bring to the fore those challenges and opportunities with special reference to Sepedi as a previously marginalised module (language) offered at the University of Limpopo, South Africa. This is a qualitative approach study seeking to understand the challenges and opportunities Sepedi students and lecturers encounter using Blackboard during COVID-19 as well as post pandemic. Semi-structured interviews were employed to collect data from both Sepedi students (n=8) and faculties (n=4) at the selected university. The researcher (n=1) also found it fit to give his views as a Sepedi lecturer. Drawing from the responses of participants, it is evident that lack of computational competency is the main challenge in both teaching and learning of Sepedi via Blackboard. Significantly, it is further reported that there are some greater developments (opportunities). The study recommends that students and faculties should appreciate Blackboard as an online teaching and learning tool for Sepedi in the age of COVID-19 and beyond.

Keywords: Sepedi, Blackboard, Teaching & Learning, Opportunities, Challenges, COVID-19 & Teaching Pedagogies.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

According to Bradford, Porciello, Balkon, and Backus (2007), Blackboard was founded in 1997 by two education specialists, namely Matthew Pittinsky and Michael Chasen. The main aim of this platform was to provide technical standards for online learning applications. This was to be done by allowing lecturers to upload course information, including syllabi, reference sites, and study guides on the Web (Bradford et al., *ibid*). By being able to upload such kind of teaching and learning materials online, the founders of Blackboard believed that this would uplift and develop the standard of education. Hence, Szabo and Hastings (2000) consider

Blackboard as a greater tool for digital lecturing. It is important to agree that Pittinsky and Chasen as the inventors of this online platform in 1997 were not in the know of the status quo (the age of COVID-19), that is to say, they did not know that the world would one day be hit by a pandemic of this nature. However, their invention of Blackboard seems to bear fruition to us as the present users of Blackboard. The arrival of COVID-19 which does not favour the traditional teaching and learning methods has forced us to resort to only online learning systems. Writing about these online learning systems, Mukhtar, Javed, Arooj and Sethi (2020) say they are web-based software for distributing, tracking and managing courses over the Internet. They further hold that online learning involves the implementation of

advancements in technology to direct, design and deliver the learning content, and to facilitate two-way communication between students and faculty.

Blackboard thus far seems to be among the leading and favourite platforms to facilitate the online teaching-learning system. Motlhaka (2020) supports this view by maintaining that Blackboard is preferred by many global institutions of higher learning due to its easiness and accessibility. Heirdsfield, Walker, Tambyah and Beutel (2011) add by asserting that Blackboard allows students to interact frequently with each other and with the instructor. The above scholars, Motlhaka (2020) and Heirdsfield et al. (2011), are of the same opinion about the significance of Blackboard.

Sepedi (also called Northern Sotho) as one of the previously marginalised African indigenous languages is offered at only seven universities in South Africa, viz. the Universities of Limpopo (UL), South Africa (UNISA), Venda (UNIVEN), Pretoria (UP), Johannesburg (UJ), Mpumalanga (UMP) as well as Tshwane University of Technology (TUT). Speaking about the marginalisation of African indigenous languages, Pam Maseko who was interviewed by Maseko and Vale (2016) bravely states that their development was never meant to benefit their speakers, but rather to assist others to understand those languages and using them for the purposes of Christianity. Although the focus of the current study is not on language marginalisation, the phenomenon has had an impact on the current teaching and learning of the previously marginalised languages such as Sepedi in this case. These said languages are not fully resourced with technological teaching materials. These languages enjoy the field when they are traditionally taught and learned, that is to say, their nature allow more of the face-to-face than that of e-Learning systems. This study bases its focus on the selected University of Limpopo, to investigate how the introduction of teaching and learning via Blackboard has affected Sepedi.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The first writings in Northern Sotho (Sepedi for the purpose of this paper) can be traced to the late 1890s and early 1900s (Makwela, 1977). However, prior that, this language was long being taught to its native people since the arrival of Berlin Missionaries in the Transvaal. Thus, the teaching and learning of Sepedi can be traced from there. However, in this paper, the challenge is utilising Sepedi as a language of teaching and learning at higher education. This issue is perhaps better put forward by Madadzhe (2019) who maintains that “it is disheartening to observe that the use of African Languages as languages of teaching and learning (LoTL) in higher education is still negligible”. Therefore, the problem in this study is teaching and learning those African Languages (Sepedi for the purpose of this study) using online platforms in the COVID-19 epoch and beyond. Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in South African in March 2020, all lectures were resorted to online. It was for the first time that Sepedi at the University of Limpopo would be encouraged to be offered online. This online lecturing saw greater challenges and less opportunities. Thus, the need for the study of this nature was open. The study reflects on the challenges and opportunities which Sepedi lecturers and students at the selected university encounter when using Blackboard as their online remote learning platform.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic in Wuhan City, China in December 2019, plenty of scholars around the world started writing about how the pandemic has affected the teaching and learning process.

The closure of educational institutions

The unexpected fast-spread of COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in global lower and higher educational institutions closing. In South Africa, the national lockdown was declared to start as from the 26th March 2020 (South

African Government Gazette 44367). This national lockdown automatically led to the closure of both lower and upper schools. This was done in respect of social distancing policy that was put forward to avoid and reduce the spread of the virus. In support of this, Adedoyin and Soykan (2020:3) has the following to say:

The global acceptance of social distancing policy, as announced by WHO as a measure to curb the spread of Covid-19, has forced schools to close their doors, and this has caused unexpected disruption of traditional teaching and learning method.

Thus, this closure of educational institutions resulted in the shifting of teaching and learning systems. Dhawan (2020) notes that many academic institutions that were earlier reluctant to change their traditional pedagogical approach had no option but to shift entirely to online teaching–learning. Congruent with Dhawan’s opinion, it is not surprising that the office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (DVC) responsible for the activities of teaching and learning at the selected University of Limpopo officially issued a communique to instruct the commence of remote learning (Madadzhe, 2020). In the communique to academic staff, the DVC stated the following about preparations:

Based on the restrictions imposed by the national lockdown, the University in accordance with the Multimodal Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning Plan initiated a range of preparations including training of academic staff on the usage of Blackboard for teaching, learning and

assessment (Madadzhe, 2020).

This systematically indicates that from the onset, the University aimed at relying more on Blackboard as its platform for online teaching and learning. However, other platforms such as WhatsApp and Google meet are also used as alternatives. The communique in this regard went thus:

The commencement of the emergency remote teaching and learning will amongst others, include the usage of Blackboard, emails, WhatsApp and video links (Madadzhe, *ibid*).

Mafenya (2021) holds that during lockdowns and school closures, lecturers and educational professionals were asked to supply students with teaching materials and instruct them via remote digital tools. Motlhaka (2021) adds that higher education institutions were quick to replace face-to-face lectures with online learning, of which these closures affected learning and examinations. Like other modules, Sepedi was also affected by closure of higher education institutions and its students and lecturers had to face the outcomes. Makafane and Chere-Masopha (2021) correctly argue that the migration of teaching and learning activities to online platforms were drastic and have imposed some challenges on both teachers and students. These challenges are no exception to teaching and learning of Sepedi, hence this study sought to expose them.

Online teaching and learning: Challenges and Advantages

Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) identify few crucial challenges brought by Covid-19 towards the learning environment, only to cite Technology, Socio-economic factors and Digital Competence among others. In terms of technology, they mention learning devices and

internet connections as challenge to students. In the second case they hold that students from low socio-economic backgrounds will suffer from accessing online learning facilities. Lastly, they reveal that students and instructors with lack of digital skills are likely to suffer to adapt with online learning. The above views make a critical submission to this study. This study acknowledges that most of Sepedi students at the concerned University are from previously disadvantaged backgrounds, thus leading to difficulty in adapting to online learning. As will be discussed later, lack of digital skills is also a critical issue to both Sepedi students and lecturers.

The learning process cannot reach its full potential until students practice what they learn. Sometimes, online content is all theoretical and does not let students practice and learn effectively (Dhawan, 2020). Participants in this study were affected by this issue. Some raised the fact that some lessons require practicality than theory as will be fully demonstrated in the findings section. Dhawan (2020) further states that technology provides innovative and resilient solutions at times of crisis to combat disruption and helps people to communicate and even work virtually without the need of face-to-face interaction. Mukhtar et al. (2020) in the same boat posit that online learning is a flexible and effective source of teaching and learning as most of them agreed upon the fact that this helps in distant learning with easy administration and accessibility along with less use resource and time. The two groups of researchers above share the same opinion, raising the positive side of online learning. This study highlights how the introduction of Blackboard has eased the process of teaching and learning for the purpose of Sepedi language.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study provides positive insights to Sepedi students and lecturers in terms of online teaching-learning amid Coronavirus pandemic and beyond. For a mere reason that this

phenomenon is not peculiar to Sepedi, the study is also insightful to lectures and students of African indigenous languages at large. The study also hopes to demolish the old fallacy that says African indigenous languages are under-developed in terms of (technological) pedagogic approaches. Adnan and Anwar (2020) hold that online learning is not good for under-developed countries, mentioning internet access and money as obstacle to students. The two scholars further state that online learning can be affective in digitally advanced countries. This matter is also central to this paper. The study argues that developing countries like South Africa are capable to offer online education.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study which sought to understand the challenges and opportunities brought by COVID-19 on the teaching and learning of Sepedi at the University of Limpopo. Nieuwenhuis (2016) observes that the heart of qualitative research lies in the extraction of meaning from data. The study thus sought to understand the difficulties and advantages brought by the pandemic in the process of teaching and learning Sepedi as a previously marginalised language in higher learning context. Data were collected from students and lecturers using semi-structured interviews instrument. The informants were purposively selected due to their relevant experience to the topic under discussion. The study invited eight Sepedi students who are in their second, third and fourth levels. Students in these levels were invited on a basis that they know the experience of both traditional (classroom) and online (Blackboard) contexts of learning. These sophomores thus gave comparative perspectives regarding the face-to-face learning and the Blackboard. Four Sepedi faculties gave their experiences on how Blackboard has affected their teaching pedagogies. Furthermore, the researcher himself gave his personal account of experience on teaching Sepedi through Blackboard in the

era of COVID-19 at the aforementioned university. Responses from all informants were analysed thematically. Answers collected from the semi-structured interviews were thoroughly studied by the researcher and thereof discussed accordingly. All participants were made aware that their participation is voluntarily and that their identity will be anonymised to protect their privacy.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

This portion of the study discusses the findings from the participants. Responses from Sepedi students and lecturers are discussed thematically. The first discussion will be from students' perspective on learning utilising Blackboard and followed by their lecturers.

Students' Responses

Learners always learn differently. They will always have varying learning styles. The arrival of COVID-19 seems to have worsen the situation regarding students who learn Sepedi at the University of Limpopo. The introduction of Blackboard as their interim mode of learning seems to have had both challenges and opportunities towards learning Sepedi.

Student 1

This student indicated that since he started learning via Blackboard, his Sepedi performance downgraded as compared to when he was learning through the traditional way. He mentioned that learning Sepedi literature utilising Blackboard was a major challenge for him as he used to rely on a lecturer's physical demonstration of literary teaching style.

Student 2

This student admitted that the use of Blackboard brought both challenges and opportunities for him. He says online learning improved his research ability. Since learning online, he was able to research online Sepedi learning material, which he could not do during traditional learning. However, this student complained about his lecturers who seem to

have insufficient knowledge about Blackboard features as compared to lecturers in other modules.

Student 3

The student made it clear that learning Sepedi via Blackboard is not working for him. She expressed her struggle to participate in lessons as she was unable to find other features related to Sepedi teaching and learning. For instance, she said she could not find the symbol [š] on Blackboard.

Student 4

This student did not hesitate to state that it is difficult to learn Sepedi via Blackboard. He is struggling to learn phonology lessons. He mentioned that at most times phonology subject requires students to do practical with speech sounds, albeit he could not do that due to computer problems and connectivity related issues.

Student 5

The fifth student lamented about online availability of Sepedi prescribed learning material. She mentioned that she used to rely on library material to access information. Since physical contacts were prohibited which resulted in libraries closing down in compliance with the national lockdown regulations, it was difficult for her to access Sepedi books utilising online platforms.

Student 6

This student shares the same laments with Student 4. He mentioned phonology as the most difficult portion for learning using Blackboard. He said that phonology subject needs more practical than theory. He further stated that phonetic symbols are hard to find on Blackboard as they were not trained for it (Blackboard).

Student 7

This student shared varying views regarding learning Sepedi via Blackboard. Firstly, on one

hand, she praised Blackboard for developing and improving her research and computer skills. She admitted that she is now interested in researching about Sepedi language as she is aware of lot of Sepedi publications online research. On the other hand, she mentioned that modules of Sepedi nature at times requires group discussion during the lesson. This could not be done through Blackboard. She mentioned that their lecturers never requested them to work in peers during lessons. She said this disadvantaged their language skills such as speaking, reading, and writing inter alia.

Student 8

This eighth student mentioned many challenges. Among others, he mentioned the difficulty of learning Sepedi folklores via Blackboard. He says some tales and riddles need to be narrated during lesson and this was never done utilising Blackboard. He further spoke about learning linguistic lessons. He said portions such as Sepedi adjectives, morphemes, adverbs, verbs, ambiguity and others required a lot of demonstration by the lecturer, and Blackboard could not allow that due to time and connectivity challenges.

Lecturers' Responses

Like learners, teachers always have different preferred styles and methods of teaching. They use varying teaching pedagogies to accommodate crucial language skills. This is to ensure that learners (students in this case) have speaking, writing, reading, viewing and listening skills. This section of the study sought to understand how COVID-19 pandemic has impacted Sepedi teaching utilising Blackboard as a mode of teaching.

Lecturer 1

This lecturer spoke about the challenge of grouping students during lesson. She said it is difficult for her to group students on Blackboard to work in peers. She admits that group-work is one of the crucial methods in teaching a language. She further elaborated that

some students learn best when working with their peers. Sadly, insufficient knowledge of some Blackboard features restricted her to instruct student to engage in group-work.

Lecturer 2

The second lecturer emphasised that it is always vital for language student to master speaking skill. He lamented about the opportunities of awarding students doing orals during Blackboard lessons. He stated that Blackboard features did not allow him to assess students orally so. According to him, students also complained about the plenty of time that orals consume. His challenges regarding oral assessment were two: that of Blackboard features and that of students not willing to participate in orals. He comparatively admitted that traditional physical lectures are far much better than online lectures in terms of oral assessment.

Lecturer 3

The third lecturer shared his views about teaching Sepedi literature via Blackboard. In a nutshell he does not enjoy teaching literature to his fullest. The greater challenge is that he has to create slides for students as they complain about lack of prescribed books online. He mentions that slides result to fraud during assessments. Students use his slides to cheat during both formative and summative assessments. To him, this encourages laziness among students. He stressed that examination fraud improved to higher level after the introduction of Blackboard for teaching, learning and assessment of Sepedi, as like in other modules at large.

Lecturer 4

The fourth lecturer shared both challenges and opportunities brought by COVID-19 in teaching Sepedi. On challenges, he indicated that the teaching style of African languages requires both teacher and learner to interact time to time. For that, students were in most cases not willing to participate during lessons,

examples with words thereof. The problem is then left with students when they are supposed to write assessment. They reportedly find it difficult to insert phonetic symbols on their answers. It is reported that the phonetic section on the assessment consumes a lot of students' time as they spend more time trying to find the phonetic symbols.

Interacting with students

In order for teaching and learning process to be learner-centred, students should be more involved in the process. The more students are involved the more effective learning it becomes. Blackboard in its nature is learner-centered and gives students equal opportunities to participate (Motlhaka, 2020).

Blackboard has features which give the instructor an opportunity to interact with students in class and I always ensure that such opportunity is used. In my lessons, I firstly greet students and expect their responses. Some will immediately open their mics and respond simultaneously, while some will save time by writing in the chat box, saying "Thobela Mofahloši". Personally, it is pleasurable for me to exchange greetings with students on Blackboard, in such a way that it feels like a physical lecture; it feels more human, touching. By giving them an opportunity to greet, students already know that they are not only going to be passive 'vessels' in class. A greeting is always a great starter for communication in the process of teaching and learning. The atmosphere of interaction begins with greetings. The other importance of greeting is to ensure that as lecturer I am not alone in class. This is to avoid a situation where a student logs in the class but he or she is not present, maybe doing house chores, watching TV or just being away from the device they are using to log in the class.

I ensure that I regularly give students affordable time to talk during the lesson. I pose questions to them on regular bases and expect their responses. As the instructor, the Blackboard

platform gives me the feature which indicates the names of students who have their hands raised. I am then able to pick any student from the list of hand-raisers. After identifying a student, I am then able to engage with him or her for some minutes. I also open discussion for students to engage themselves, maybe to argue about a particular subject, then as instructor I come later to comment and clarify their attempts. This strategy seems to be tantamount to Jančaříková and Jančařík's (ibid) opinion, that interactive learning should see students discussing. Students are able to raise their hands to ask questions and I ensure that feedback is given to them as quick as possible. As Smart et al. (2012) posit, questions that students pose are crucial to the process of learning and modifying their mental models. As always observed in traditional teaching method, there are always students who are not willing to participate in class, such students will never raise their hands to give attempts or opinion or even to ask a question. I have noted with great disappointments that such students are still found in our online learning. To avoid this, I randomly call their names from the attendance list and politely encourage them to give their attempts or opinions. However, on the other hand, it is true that some experience connectivity problems and as a result they are unable to respond on time. I encourage such students to write in the chat box and interestingly they do so. The other challenge that students raised is that they are unable to open their mics when they are supposed to engage in class. That sounds to be a computer-setting issue, as an instructor I could not resolve it.

The most important method of teaching that I have been failing to achieve is to group students or to instruct students to group themselves during Blackboard session. Burke (2011) opines that collaborative learning, or small group work, remains an important element of active learning theory and practice. Brown (2003) adds that group work serves as an important attribute of a learner-centered approach. Furthermore, collaborative learning

facilitates active exchange of ideas within groups, increases motivation among participants, promotes critical thinking, fosters socialization, improves attitudes towards learning, and develops a better understanding of diverse cultural background (Hassanien, 2006). To that end, grouping students is a major form of collaborative learning. It is therefore vital to award students with such an opportunity to interact with each other. My lack of computational knowledge and competency seems to be the reason behind my failure to group students, thus limiting students with opportunities to work in peers.

CONCLUSION

Roux and Ndinga-Koumba-Binza (nd.) suggest that the development of digital language resources is necessary to empower African languages with advances in the digital world. Blackboard as an online learning resource proves the above view to be true. This study thus highlighted how useful Blackboard is in the age of COVID-19 towards teaching and learning Sepedi at the selected university. As the world digitally develops, it seems Sepedi and other African languages' teaching and learning style develops too. As both the author of this paper and a Sepedi lecturer, I recommend that concerned users (students and lecturers) should appreciate Blackboard as a tool for online teaching and learning in the age of COVID-19 and beyond. My established experience insofar proves that Blackboard is working adequately for me. The interactive learning environment which I often attempt to create aimed at ensuring the fulfilment of constructivist principles. The challenges we encounter are the lessons which lead to development, and we should strive for resolutions. Responses from participants of this study show that even though there are still plenty of challenges regarding teaching and learning of Sepedi digitally, there are some opportunities emerging. These opportunities should be seen as major promising factors regarding digital teaching of the previously marginalised indigenous African languages.

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