ENHANCING QUALITY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN NIGERIA THROUGH ADOPTION OF BLENDED LEARNING BY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

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ABSTRACT

In recent times, the significance and impact of Blended Learning in advancing the quality of education globally have become increasingly apparent. Consequently, it is imperative for educators to adopt blended learning as a teaching strategy. The study investigated the adoption of blended learning by Early Childhood Education teachers in Nigerian Primary Schools. Descriptive survey design was employed for the study. The sample size consisted of 450 teachers that were randomly selected from the three Senatorial Districts in Ondo State Nigeria. A self-designed instrument was used to collect data for the study. The instrument was validated and tested for reliability at coefficient of 0.75. Data collected were analysed using frequency, percentages and ranking. The result revealed that 387(86%) of the teachers in Ondo state has adopted blended learning and majority of the teachers had positive perceptions of BL as a teaching strategy. It was concluded that ECE teachers in Ondo state Nigeria has adopted blended learning as a teaching strategy. The study recommended that government and other stakeholders should give more awareness on BL and provide teachers and learners with necessary facilities needed in school and home.

Keywords: blended learning; early childhood education; primary school; teacher; teaching strategy

INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education as an education that is given at the foundational level for all children is very fundamental to human and national development because every child is entitled to experience quality education from their early years for them to have a more promising prospect in life. A quality early childhood education is designed to ensure that adequate and qualitative education given to all children is directed towards achieving the nation's objectives. It is therefore a type of education that focuses on the 'Education for All' a movement that was led by United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization – UNESCO which was also included as Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs) 4 in the 17 SDGs set up in 2015 by the United Nations General Assembly, that is targeted to be achieved by 2030.

It is not a gain saying that one of the major requirements of quality education is the teaching strategies being applied by the teachers, caregivers or instructors. The quality of strategies applies by teachers during teaching learning process determines the effectiveness and quality of a teacher also on learners learning outcomes. Teaching strategy is regarded as a universal plan for a lesson which includes structure instructional objectives and an outline of planned teaching methods which are necessary to implement the strategies that a teacher plans to use (Stone & Morris, in Isaac, 2010).

Furthermore, Isaac (2010) gives more details that teaching strategies are those behaviours of the teacher which he intends to manifest in the class, that is, the developments of the teaching strategies, giving proper stimulus for timely responses, drilling the learnt responses, increasing the responses by extra activities and so on. In other words, teacher's style of teaching strategy gives learners the opportunity to learn effectively both in the classroom and outside classroom. Any teaching that takes place and the learners are unable to achieve anything gives the signal that the teacher has not achieved the objectives of the lesson. Therefore, teaching strategy is the standard of every formal teacher–learner's interaction in which learning is the main product. Essentially, a teacher guides the activities of the learners in order to produce effective learning (Geoffrey, 2017).

The use of technology in the classrooms has taken over teaching in the 21st Century. At the same time, blended learning is gaining more recognition in the classrooms since emergence of Covid-19 and Post Covid-19 in Nigeria. The teachers at all levels of education including the caregivers in early childhood education therefore, need to get exposed to the use of technology in teaching and learning process and how it can enhance performance and motivate learners towards learning. Blended learning is usually understood as a combination of face-to-face and the use of online in teaching with the goal of each teaching methods complementing the other. It is thus expected that there is a significant relationship between blended learning and learner's learning experiences and its ultimate achievement (Ezekoka, 2015). The world is changing constantly and the various domains are also influenced by the change, the education domain is of no exemption.

However, demands are high for both technology and traditional learning methods in today's society. As a result of this, the art of combining digital learning tools with traditional classroom face to face teaching gave birth to the term "Blended Learning". Blended consist of two words, blended (mix) and Learning (studying). It is a mixture of online digital media and other educational technology tools with traditional classroom methods.

Blended learning can also be referred to as a situation where mixed method is being used as a novel method used in teaching and learning environment (Lee, Lim & Kim 2017; Thai, De Wever & Valcke 2017). Santosh (2013) opines that blended learning is a method by which learners learns at least in partly through online content delivery and instruction with some element of learner's control over time, place, path, and/or pace. Blended learning is a way of integrating ICT into teaching with the aim of enhancing the teaching and learning experiences for learners and teachers by enabling them to engage in ways that would not normally be available or effective in their usual environment, whether it is primarily face-to-face or distance mode (Debra & John, 2010). Santosh (2013) also identifies six types of blended learning thus:

1. Face-to-face Driver (teacher led instruction) is a blended learning model in which teachers deliver most of the curriculum. The teachers lead the class in a lecture following

an established protocol taking precedence and technology being a secondary thought. However, they also produce online resources to supplement or revise course material which learners can study at home, in the classroom or in a technology lab.

2. Rotation: In the rotation model of blended learning: within a given course, a learner rotates on a fixed schedule between learning online in a one-to-one, self-paced environment and sitting in a classroom with a traditional face-to-face teacher.

3. Flex: Flex model of blended learning features an online platform that delivers most of the curricula. It is the model where most of the learning is done online and the face-to face model exists to provide on-site support for a flexible and adaptive, as required basis through in-person tutoring sessions and small group sessions.

4. Online Lab: Online lab is a model of blended learning that characterized programs that rely on an online platform to deliver the entire course but in a brick-and-mortar lab environment. The entire course content and teaching are done online. Teachers interact with learners through prerecorded videos, audio and video conferences or discussion forums and email.

5. Self-Blend: The Self-Blend model is a fully individualized approach that allows learners to choose one or more courses online to supplement their traditional school's catalog. Maximum part of the learning is done online, but the learner will still attend face-to-face classes.

6. Online Driver: Online Driver involves online platform as well as teachers to deliver the curricula. Learners work from remote locations most of the time and come to school for optional or required face-to-face classes.

Linton (2018) describes some models that can be applied to make blended learning work in early childhood education centres and classrooms, these are: rotation model (station rotation, lab rotation, flipped classroom and individual rotation), flex model, a la carte model and the enriched virtual model. Some sub-model form and strategies of blended learning that can be implemented at the elementary class are also described by Tucker, Wycoff and Green (2017). It can be evident from this assertions that blended learning as a teaching strategy can be applied by early childhood education caregivers and teachers in other to achieve quality early childhood education.

Fisher, Perenyi and Birdthistle (2018) found out in their study that learners were more involved with a flipped classroom model rather than the conventional classroom model because the learners actively participate in enjoyable learning experience. Kocour (2019) also discovered in her study that blended learning had a positive effect on learner's engagement in an inclusive pre-school classroom. She further found out that learners were more engaged when the activities during small group showed up twice during the week rather than having new activities daily. From the foregoing, it can be agreed that adoption of blended learning as a teaching strategy by early childhood education teachers and caregivers in Nigerian primary schools is very essential for enhancing quality early childhood education in Nigeria. Hence, there is necessity to investigate the level of adoption of blended learning as a teaching strategy by early childhood education teachers in Ondo State Nigeria.

Objectives Of The Study
The overall objective of the study was to investigate the level of adoption of blended learning as a teaching strategy by early childhood education teachers in Nigerian Primary Schools. The specific objectives are to:
  i.   Assess the level of early childhood teachers' involvement in blended learning as a teaching strategy;

ii.   Examine early childhood teachers' perceptions of blended learning as a teaching strategy;
iii. Investigate the challenges of blended learning experienced by early childhood teachers.

Research Questions

The following questions were answered in this study:

i.   What is the level of early childhood teachers' involvement in blended learning as a teaching strategy?
ii.   What are the perceptions of early childhood teachers' on blended learning as a teaching strategy?
iii. Are there any challenges being experienced by early childhood education teachers on using blended learning as a teaching strategy?

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted survey research design. The population for the study comprised all early childhood education teachers in Ondo State Nigeria. The sample size consisted of 450 teachers. Multistage sampling procedure was used for the study. Three Local Governments were randomly selected from the 6 Local Governments in each of the Senatorial District in Ondo State using simple random sampling technique. In each of the Local Governments, 10 schools (5 public and 5 private) were randomly selected, making 30 schools in a senatorial district and 90 schools in all the senatorial districts. Two lower primary school teachers were purposively selected from the public schools that make a total of 180 and 3 private school teachers that teach at the nursery level (1, 2 & 3) were randomly selected from the school using simple random sampling techniques and that makes a total of 270 teachers. One self-designed instrument by the researchers titled "Blended Learning Teaching Strategy" (BLTS) was used to collect data for the study. The questionnaire has 15 items in total and the descriptive statements cut across all areas that was meant to be investigated. The reliability of the instrument was carried out using Internal Consistency Approach based on Cronbach's Alpha. Data obtained from the instruments yielded correlation coefficient of 0.75. Data collected were analyzed using frequency, percentages, mean and ranking.

RESULTS

Research Question One: What is the level of early childhood education teachers' involvement in blended learning as a teaching strategy?

Table 1: Frequency and Percentage Level of Early Childhood Education Teachers' Involvement in Blended Learning as a Teaching Strategy

S/N	Descriptive Statement	Agreed	Strongly Agreed	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	No Response
1.	It is the method I used most since emergence of Covid-19	266(59%)	121(27%)	23(5.1%)	10(2.2%)	30(6.7%)
2.	It makes me get more attracted to technology usage for teaching	184(41%)	130(29%)	68(15%)	27(6%)	41(9%)

Table 1 above shows the level of teacher's involvement in blended learning as a teaching strategy. It shows that 387(86%) of the teachers has been using the strategy for teaching, 33(7.3%) of the teachers had not been using the strategy while 30(6.7%) did not

give any response. 314(70%) accepted that BL has made them get more used to technology for teaching, 95(21%) did not accept that it made them get more used to technology while 41(9%) did not give any response.

Research Question Two: What are the perceptions of early childhood education teachers' on blended learning as a teaching strategy?

Table 2:   Frequency Counts and Percentages of Early Childhood Education Teachers' Perceptions on Blended Learning as a Teaching Strategy

S/N	Descriptive Statement	Agreed	Strongly Agreed	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	No Response
1.	Blended learning is an effective teaching method for me	210(47%)	142(32%)	44(9%)	24(5%)	30(7%)
2.	It is preferable to pure conventional method	184(41%)	166(37%)	70(15%)	-	30(7%)
3.	It really makes my class an interactive one	232(52%)	110(24%)	78(17%)	-	30(7%)
4.	It facilitates independent learning for my learners	224(50%)	114(25%)	63(14%)	19(4%)	30(7%)
5.	It helps to reduce the withdrawal rate of learners in my class	302(67%)	50(11%)	50(11%)	18(4%)	30(7%)
6.	It enhances my learner's learning outcomes	306(68%)	32(7%)	82(18%)	-	30(7%)
7.	It helps in balancing their school exercises and home work	220(49%)	114(25%)	64(14%)	22(5%)	30(7%)
8.	My learners love blended learning	232(52%)	106(24%)	64(14%)	18(3%)	30(7%)

Table 2 above shows the perceptions of early childhood education teachers on BL as a teaching strategy. It shows that 352(79%) of the teachers agreed to BL as an effective method of teaching, 66(14%) did not agree to it as an effective method of teaching, 350(78%) preferred BL to conventional method, 70(15%) did not prefer BL to conventional method, 342(76%) agreed that BL makes their classes an interactive one, 78(17%) did not agree to it, 336(75%) agreed that BL facilitates independent learning for learners, 82(18%) did not agree that BL facilitates independent learning for learners, 352(78%) agreed that BL helps in reducing their learners withdrawal rate in the class, 68(15%) did not agree to BL helping them reducing their learners withdrawal rate in the class, 338(75%) agreed that BL enhances their learners learning outcomes, 82(18%) did not agree that BL learning enhances their learners learning outcomes, 334(74%) agreed that BL helps in balancing learners class

exercises and homework, 86(19%) did not agree that BL helps in balancing class exercises and homework, 338(76%) agreed that their learners love blended learning while 82(17%) did not agree to the statement.

Research Question Three: Are there any challenges being experienced by early childhood education teachers on using blended learning as a teaching strategy?

Table 3: Showing Frequency Counts, Percentages and Ranking of Challenges Being Experienced by Early Childhood Education Teachers on Using Blended Learning as a Teaching Strategy

S/N	Descriptive Statement	Agreed	Strongly Agreed	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	No Response	Ranking
1.	It is difficult for me to get across to my learners equally	149(33%)	131(29%)	103(23%)	37(8%)	30(7%)	7th
2.	High cost of data bundle hinders the methodology	135(30%)	239(53%)	46(10%)	-	30(7%)	3rd
3.	Preparing pedagogical materials that would meet all learner's need is an obstacle	198(44%)	135(30%)	68(15%)	19(4%)	30(7%)	5th
4.	Unavailability of personal tablet, laptop or desktop computer for teachers and learner's usage at home and school	176(39%)	203(45%)	23(6%)	18(3%)	30(7%)	2nd
5.	Poor internet connectivity	149(33%)	239(53%)	32(7%)	-	30(7%)	1st
6.	Lack of encouragement from the government	128(28%)	219(49%)	54(12%)	19(4%)	30(7%)	4th
7.	Lack of encouragement from the administrative arms of the school	149(33%)	136(30%)	87(19%)	48(11%)	30(7%)	6th
8.	Lack of cooperation from the parents	134(30%)	43(10%)	149(33%)	94(20%)	30(7%)	8th

Table 3 above shows the challenges being experienced by early childhood education teachers on using blended learning as a teaching strategy. It shows that highest percentage of teachers 388(86%) agreed that poor internet connectivity, 379(84%) unavailability of personal tablet, laptop or desktop computer for teachers and learner's usage at home and school, 374(83%) high cost of data bundle hinders the methodology, 347(77%) lack of encouragement from the government, 333(74%) preparing pedagogical materials that would meet all learners need is an obstacle, 285(63%) lack of encouragement from the administrative arms of the school, 280(62%) it is difficult for them to get across to their learners equally while the low percentage 177(40%) of the teachers agreed that lack of cooperation from the parents are the challenges being faced on using blended learning as a teaching strategy.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of the study revealed that highest percentage of teachers in Ondo state has adopted blended learning as a teaching strategy. This finding corroborates that of Saeed (2020) who found out that teachers adopted blended learning as a teaching strategy as they began with the adoption of station rotation and flipped classroom models as a beginner in implementation of blended learning as a teaching strategy. It also supports the findings of Turner, Young-Lowe and Newton (2018) who found out in their study that teachers recognized the importance and advantages of blended learning as teachers and they have increased their use of blended learning for instructional delivery and learners learning outcomes. It finally agrees with Khoza, Zlotnikova, Bada and Kalegele (2016) who also found out that teacher's knowledge of technology has increased and this has influence on their adoption of blended learning as a teaching strategy. However, the study disagrees with the report of Ejinkeonye and Usoroh (2016) that, Nigerian secondary school teachers rarely use technology in delivering instructions to learners. It can be confirmed from this findings that many teachers across the globe has adopted blended learning as a teaching strategy and Ondo state is not excluded but reason to this findings might be due to the high population of teachers investigated from the private schools.

It is generally believed that most parents who can afford to send their children to private schools do meet with majority of their children needs. Also, the private school owners are viewed of being investing in their schools as there is always a competition between them. In this case they may be investing on professional development of their teachers on technology usage than teachers in the government schools. The finding further revealed that teachers had positive perceptions of blended learning as a teaching strategy. The finding supported Hensley (2020) who found out that there were commonalities in teacher's perceptions of blended learning in term of accepting that blended learning engage and empowers learners, enhanced instruction with the strategic use of technology and personalized learners learning. However, the finding of the study disagrees with several other research reports: Otemuyiwa and Attah (2020) that teachers have negative perceptions about the use of blended learning as a teaching strategy in their instructional delivery, Adomi and Kpangban (2010) that teachers' perception about blended learning as a teaching and learning strategy was negative and they concluded that this perception is one of the major factors hindering its adoption in Nigerian schools. It further revealed that the challenges being experienced most by the teachers on adopting BL into their teaching strategy are poor internet connectivity, unavailability of personal laptop, computer and tablets, high cost of data bundle

and lack of encouragement from the government. This finding supports Nwana (2012) who found that shortage of internet facilities is a challenge in the application of e-learning by teachers in Anambra state.

CONCLUSION

It is evident from the findings that early childhood education teachers in Ondo state has adopted blended learning as a teaching strategy. Also, highest percentage of the teachers had positive perceptions towards blended learning as a teaching strategy. It therefore shows that majority of teachers who adopt and those that are yet to adopt blended learning as a teaching strategy are experiencing some challenges that is hindering its full implementation and adoption in Nigeria.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings discussed above, the following recommendations are made;

- Government and other stakeholders in education should support and encourage Early Childhood Education teachers in the public primary schools through sponsoring of seminars, conferences, capacity building workshop on blended learning usage.
- There should be continuous sensitization on blended learning as a teaching strategy through social media platforms.
- Teachers should embrace the attitude of self-development on technology usage
- Parents should support the enhancement of quality early childhood education by making provision for facilities that are required of them for their children both at home and school
- There should be improvement on network by internet service providers.
- The Nigerian Communication Commission should establish law that will guide internet service providers on data bundles charges.

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