Sustainable ESL teacher support in the Global South through e-coaching

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This qualitative study investigates the challenges faced by five ESL teachers in Nigeria and the role of an e-coaching intervention in providing support for these challenges. In undertaking the study, the author engaged in a two-cycle coaching session involving a pre-planning conference and post-observation feedback with the teachers. Teachers were interviewed to examine their perceptions about e-coaching support. Analysis revealed several key findings on the role of the coach in providing instrumental support to the teachers, which they felt had a positive impact on their professional development. The study proposes e-coaching as a feasible teacher development activity in low-resource contexts and sheds light on whether the coaching models adopted via online platforms are accessible and practicable for experienced ESL teachers in comparable contexts across both sub-Saharan Africa and the wider Global South.

Key words: Global South, professional development, e-coaching, ESL teaching challenges

Introduction

Contemporary coaching models for teacher professional development include literacy coaching, cognitive coaching, and instructional coaching (Sisson and Sisson 2017). Both literacy and instructional coaching are suitable for L2 teachers of English who aspire to engage in job-embedded professional learning. The principle guiding these models is for students to have access to high-quality instruction. The cognitive coaching model stems from the principle that when teachers are aware of their thinking processes, they will be motivated to extend their level of professionalism and develop the problem-solving skills needed in the twenty-first century.

In Nigeria, like many countries in the Global South, studies have shown that primary and secondary education have suffered from poor-quality teaching practices (Aliyu 2019). In such contexts, effective teacher-coaching programmes that embody teacher–coach interactions, constructive feedback, and tools used between the coach and teachers with a proportionate teacher–coach ratio may help to improve student learning (Aliyu 2019).

It is for this purpose that this paper seeks to explore how e-coaching provides developmental support to Nigerian primary and secondary

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teachers of English working in low-resource contexts. By adopting a phenomenological approach (Creswell and Creswell 2017), this study explores the potential advantages of an e-coaching intervention for L2 teachers of English in Nigeria. As such, it sheds light on whether the coaching models adopted via online platforms are accessible and practicable for experienced ESL teachers in comparable contexts across both sub-Saharan Africa and the wider Global South.

Literature review

Over a decade ago, Johnson and Golombek identified externalization (a process of seeking mediational support outside of the school context) as a transformative approach to propel teacher reflection through social influence which can develop teachers' tacit knowledge and understanding about their day-to-day classroom issues (Johnson and Golombek 2011). Coaching is one form of externalization that is collaborative, sustained, action-oriented, and involves cycles of observation and feedback (Joyce and Showers 1982).

In Nigeria, the effectiveness of ESL teachers in primary and secondary schools is often questioned because students' academic performance is generally low. Research reveals that the teachers face a lot of classroom challenges that affect teaching and learning (Martens *et al.* 2020). These include a dire lack of adequate teaching materials and overcrowded classroom settings (Martens *et al.* 2020), and the fact that many teachers employed to teach English have educational qualification in different areas, which impacts upon their teaching ability (Jacob *et al.* 2020). Providing individualized support to these teachers to boost their effectiveness may be achieved through coaching.

In a traditional coaching session, coach and coachee meet face to face (F2F) to discuss the developmental goal at hand. Studies have revealed several issues emerging from F2F coaching, including: teachers feeling uncomfortable being observed; the possibility of face-threatening acts characterized by uncertainty, abuse, ambiguity, and power; and issues of time management, expenses, and space (Tunc-Paftali and Tekin-Iftar 2021). Considering these drawbacks, online coaching (i.e. e-coaching) serves as a valuable alternative because it uses technology to deliver feedback to teachers through asynchronous and synchronous communication tools. Also, many teachers can access it in their own time and pace, and it does not require intense financial and human resources (Tunc-Paftali and Tekin-Iftar 2021). In an e-coaching practice, a coach and coachee may decide on the appropriate time to discuss the teaching and feedback, observation may be conducted via video-sharing, and teachers can upload their videos showing evidence of implementation of ideas discussed during the coaching session (Walsh *et al.* 2020). Although this process has its own weaknesses (e.g. teachers may not be able to record close groupwork across the whole class, or technical issues with sound or vision) (Blikstad-Balas 2017), recorded videos can identify students' learning and offer a potent tool for teachers to engage in selective attending and knowledge-based reasoning (Walsh *et al.* 2020).

Another form of online coaching is in-ear coaching. This is synchronous but does not require F2F on-site discussion or delivery. Instead, it allows the coach to offer unobtrusive real-time in-ear feedback to the teacher

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(Preston and Younie 2016). Although intermittent internet connection problems may interfere in giving feedback to coaches, and novice coaches may, at times, be insensitive in their comments, as Preston and Younie (2016) observe, coached do not need to comment in real time and could cultivate a reflective approach in their feedback practices by commenting later after they have thought about what message they wish to send. This is because online technological tools allow sharing and commenting in both written and spoken form to encourage interaction (Walsh *et al.* 2020).

To date there has been little research on e-coaching in ESL teacher professional development; most research on e-coaching focuses on other disciplines such as business and health. Therefore, this study addresses the research in which video observation has emerged as an essential tool to support teachers' capacity to reflect on their teaching practice. It addresses the challenges faced by ESL teachers in Nigeria by investigating the following four questions:

1. What specific challenges do participant teachers report in their daily practice?
2. In what ways do they feel that e-coaching offers help with these challenges and their professional development in general?
3. What were the advantages and disadvantages of specific e-coaching tools (e.g. WhatsApp media) in the process?
4. What did the e-coach learn from the experience that may help other teacher educators working in similar contexts?

Methodology

This study involves qualitative phenomenological research that is interpretive in nature to examine a designated social phenomenon (Creswell and Creswell, 2017), in this case, the coaching experience of an e-coach with ESL teachers in secondary schools. The interpretive phenomenological method assumes that the researcher can never disengage from her feelings, experiences, and knowledge while interacting with study participant, thereby resulting in research co-created between the researcher and the study participants, with each bringing one's uniqueness to the research (Dodgson 2017).

The research was conducted in an online space using WhatsApp as the primary communication tool and involved five participant English language teachers from Nigeria (convenience sampled) and one coach (the author). One of the teachers teaches in a government school while the others teach at private schools. The participants' teaching experience ranged from two to eleven years as shown in Table 1 (pseudonyms used).

This e-coaching intervention adopted the instructional coaching model (Sisson and Sisson 2017). This involved three cycles of coaching: pre-planning conference (PPC), observation (O), and post-observation feedback conference (POFC). The cycle was conducted twice. Prior to the classroom activity, the coachee/teacher called the coach via WhatsApp for a PPC. During the conversation, both the coach and the teacher discussed the lesson to be taught, the lesson plan, teaching strategies, and how the teacher hoped to gauge learners' level of understanding. For the observation, each teacher recorded a video of the lesson, which they watched and sent via WhatsApp to the coach for review. During the POFC,

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Name and qualification	Context	Years of experience
Sha BA and PGDE in education	Private secondary school	11
Pal BEd	Government/state-funded secondary school	3
Ola BSc in education	Private primary school	10
Mam BEd teacher education in English	Private secondary school	2
Haf BSc in economics	Private primary school	3

TABLE 1
Teacher background information

the coach helped each teacher recall the event of the classroom teaching to identify successes and problems and decide on the best ways to solve them. Interviews were done after the whole coaching cycle to gather teachers' opinions about the intervention. As the e-coach, I also reflected critically on the action in a diary after every stage of the coaching process.

Findings

Challenges reported by the participant teachers

Specific challenges reported by teachers in their daily practice include teachers' inability to organize students into groups, a low student interest in participation around school break periods, teachers reducing student talk time to cover curriculum content, disjointed lists of topics in the scheme of work, and learner difficulties experienced during the teaching of reading comprehension.

Teachers found it difficult to organize students into groups for several reasons, particularly the physical challenge of moving furniture in the room, as explained by Sha, a junior secondary teacher:

> **Sha:** ... they use the chain to tie the chair to the desk, so it is difficult to move the chair away from the desk. You know forming the groups in the class usually become a time wasting, so how do you think we could go around this kind of problem?

Sha further attributed his lack of preparedness to arrange students into groups to students' late arrival to class after break periods. This was also mentioned by Pal, another secondary teacher who also complained about the rowdiness in the classroom prior to breaks:

> **Pal:** ... so that lesson was just before break. you can see how very divided their attention was, thinking about the food they will eat, the food they buy and all that, I believe that contributed to making the class a bit more rowdy ...

Because learner-centred activities were time-consuming, the teachers often spent most of the lesson presenting lesson content. They did this by explaining the topic without giving students adequate time to discuss it or answer questions. Another related reason stated by teachers for low students' interaction in the classroom was the fixed topics specified on the scheme of work that needed to be taught within a short period of time, as Mam, a secondary teacher observed:

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Mam: If I were to teach this lesson by focusing on the persuasive writing style, I will have to do the same for the other kinds of essays and the time allotted won't be enough … according to our scheme, we have five or four topics in four periods in a week. … It is left with the teacher to know when to allot a topic. So, I have to manage my time wisely.

Pal further presented a vivid illustration to this problem as the cause of much teacher-centred instruction:

Pal: If you look closely at the scheme of work I sent to you … for instance, if the scheme states learn adverbial clause, what follows could be let's learn the types of adverbial clause if it states this for the first time, then two or three weeks after, it states learn the adverbial clause of condition which is part of adverbial clause, it doesn't make sense You understand? So, if we do a kind of chunking, by putting the knowledge together it will make more sense. That is what I try to do … so this is one good reason that we must write on the board otherwise the message will be very difficult for the students to grasp.

Interestingly, among the five teachers only one successfully predicted a challenge she might face in the classroom during the PPC. The challenge was the difficulties her learners faced during reading comprehension due to their vocabulary:

Haf: They find some words difficult … I don't know what to do because they have many comprehension passages to read and is always the same thing.

As indicated in Table 1, Haf has a BSc in economics but teaches in a primary school. Her educational background did not expose her to approaches for teaching reading comprehension. She was eager for her learners to read passages from the textbook, but some of them could not process the texts and answer the questions correctly. During the PPC, she explained that she was unable to find the best approach to tackle her learners' difficulty in reading comprehension and the e-coach suggested the bottom-up processing for her to explore with her learners.

Participants' perception of the usefulness of e-coaching in helping them deal with classroom issues

Semi-structured interviews conducted after the e-coaching intervention indicated that all five teachers were positive about their coaching experiences:

Sha: It was an eye-opener. It was refreshing because as somebody who has been teaching for a very long time, I didn't view updates and ways of doing things and it enlightened me and showed me things that I've not really thought about.

Pal: It has been very revealing and highly beneficial especially in some classroom techniques and in delivering our lessons.

Mam: The coaching exercise has been an eye opener, I must confess. I am now exposed to some things that I didn't know before.

In relation to teachers' perception of e-coaching towards their professional development, Sha commented on the impact of the suggestions the e-coach gave which consequently made learning more meaningful to his junior secondary students. Both Pal and Mam reported that their work

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improved because students became more involved in the class after adopting the suggestions that the coach offered:

> **Mam**: ... I am more conscious of my students' extra participation in the class. I have created more rooms for them to deepen their thought. Instead of the teacher-centred lesson, now I look forward to creating more time for them so that the teacher–students talking time will increase.

Meanwhile Ola and Haf, who teach primary students, indicated they have become more conscious of the approaches they use in the classroom:

> **Ola**: It was a nice session at least it helped me to be able to identify some approaches. Though I have been doing those things before subconsciously, take for instance the PPP and the task-based before now, I didn't know what they mean. I was able to identify those approaches.

Haf also elaborated on the positive effect of the approaches on her primary students' reading comprehension and vocabulary development:

> **Haf**: what changed actually is the fact that the children now pay attention to comprehension passages. ... The students answered their passages better. In fact, when we are reading, they point out difficult words from the passages, the students will say: Mrs Haf let's write this word, the word looks long and tricky.

Participants' opinions of the technological tools used during the e-coaching process

The WhatsApp call connection between the e-coach and each teacher was interrupted a few times during the PPC and the POFC. Hence, voice notes were used. Meanwhile teachers were able to upload their video lessons to Google Drive for the e-coach to observe. Similarly, written feedback was sent via Gmail to teachers. However, all but one teacher acknowledged the nervousness faced by their students when a video recording was done in their classroom for the first time:

> **Mam**: I am attributing their inability to answer my questions well to nervousness because I think if it were to be a normal classroom setting where there was no video recording just me and them like that, we are used to ourselves already, I think they would have performed and meet up to my expectations ...

Ola was the only teacher who admitted feeling personally pressured while he recorded his teaching, noting that his mood affected his communication while giving instructions, leading to a few mix-ups in the things he said to his primary students. He added that his students answered questions at the end of the class, but he was not satisfied with their participation because he wanted them to read more:

> **Ola**: ... I would have also given them worksheets from the textbook instead of them answering question in their notebook.

Here, the infrequent use of technology in the classroom made the students and teacher feel intimidated.

Lessons learnt by the e-coach

As the participants' e-coach, I made my reflections using a reflection-on-action style of journal writing, doing this after each PPC and POFC. These reflections revealed that I had learned about the art of questioning

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and realized that effective listening is essential for a coach. Some questions I asked were not directly related to the teachers' recountings of their classroom experience. These were, I feel, a consequence of low concentration and comprehension which also made me quick to ask a question because the issues raised at that point seemed too much for me to grasp.

I realized that only teachers who are intrinsically motivated to learn can develop in their teaching practices. The teachers who volunteered to take part in this study had the determination and motivation required to facilitate change in their teaching practices. Through the process of coaching them, I realized that learning is reciprocal. It is not only the coachee who learns from the coach; the coachee also helps the coach to learn better. I had to maintain a non-judgemental stance when proffering suggestions. By using hedges, I was able to make the teachers feel they could improve in their subsequent lessons. As a coach, I have to practice these skills, to reflect on my learning and develop my own stylistic language.

Ironically, the teachers felt that as I asked them how they plan to teach their lesson, I was better informed. However, I wonder if being a coach makes one an expert especially when one is on a learning continuum. Coaching teachers via WhatsApp also made me realize that being a practitioner is about more than just having knowledge. It is about knowing how to use that knowledge. I learned to think on the spot to give suggestions to teachers' enquiries confidently after the first coaching session.

It is evident from the above reflections that I was a novice coach at the time. The strategies I adopted were supportive rather than directive as the coachees had expected, which encouraged them to reflect honestly about the intricacies of their classroom. Perhaps this style of coaching may have prompted the teachers to make contextually appropriate suggestions for themselves on the teaching method to use in their classroom, rather than my directly telling them how to do it. So, the process enabled a degree of individual professional development which again, was probably a 'first' for them all. With online communication, a good understanding of the coaching process, and the motivation to support teachers, I believe that head teachers from individual schools in the Global South can benefit from this professional development and be in a position to further support teachers of English.

Discussion

Among the findings for the first research question, it can be deduced that ESL teachers require professional knowledge on grouping strategies for ESL learners in overcrowded classrooms in a manner that is not time-consuming. This finding resonates with an earlier study that revealed the poor teaching method used by teachers in large multilingual classrooms in Nigeria (Aliyu 2019). In the current study, Sha had a class of forty students and was unable to arrange the students in groups due to their late arrival. Students' late arrival was also mentioned by Pal as a reason for making the ESL class rowdy, which further resulted in making students passive learners. Keyes (2019) found that the use of assigned seats in a punitive manner did not promote classroom belonging or behavioural engagement of students. Rather, instilled classroom management practices by teachers

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went beyond just dealing with disruptive behaviour, created a seating arrangement to facilitate pair and group work, and supported students to become active learners in the classroom.

Indeed, encouraging active learners in the classroom requires giving students adequate time to discuss the lesson or answer questions, consistent with a communicative approach to ESL teaching. Unfortunately, as observed in this study by Mam, the pressure to cover the contents in the scheme of work within a limited time frame is responsible for much teacher-centred teaching rather than the promotion of effective communicative and linguistic competence. It cannot be overemphasized that ESL teachers need to plan an appropriate strategy for purposeful activities to identify and mitigate potential sources of challenges in the classroom. These findings are unsurprising as teachers' low pedagogic content knowledge have been identified as an issue for effective ESL teaching and learning (Jacob *et al*. 2020).

The comments made in this study by Haf, who identified the support of the e-coach as important in enabling her to figure out the best approach to use for teaching her ESL learners reading comprehension skills, indicate the need for an e-coach to be able to take on the role of a literacy coach. By doing so, they can act as an instructional specialist who is knowledgeable about the pedagogy of literacy instruction and draws upon a repertoire of best-practice strategies to address the diverse needs of students across a range of grade levels and learning environments (Sisson and Sisson 2017).

The contribution of the e-coach towards helping to deal with participating ESL teachers' classroom issues is further reflected in the answer to the second research question. It is clear that the teachers became more conscious of their learners' participation in the classroom as a result of e-coaching. An important point to note that aided the capacity of the e-coach was planning the lesson with the teacher and observing each teacher's classroom by watching the teachers' uploaded videos. This approach is consistent with the role of a coach as a professional developer (Sisson and Sisson 2017). Utilizing technological tools during the e-coaching process allowed Ola to engage in 'selective attending' by noticing his communication skills and students' participation in the lesson (Walsh *et al*. 2020). Trying something new can be intimidating even though it is essential, especially when teachers are concerned about how to achieve a specific objective and salvage a lesson.

E-coaching in this study allowed for convenience, comfort, and greater openness and rapport between the e-coach and the teachers, as highlighted by Tunc-Paftali and Tekin-Iftar (2021) It also supports Preston and Younie's (2016) finding that the use of online media allowed the e-coach access to teachers' classrooms and provide unobtrusive feedback through e-mail. Issues about the use of media were highlighted by the teachers, especially as the video recording of the classroom made the students camera shy and unable to answer questions confidently. Also, audio recording of the classroom made teachers less confident in their communication. This finding agrees with Blikstad-Balas's (2017) study which identified camera-effect and reactivity as practical issues to consider when using video in the course of investigating social practices in education. Hence there is a need

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for a trusting relationship between teacher and students when utilizing technology for classroom observation.

According to Sisson and Sisson (2017), a critical aspect of the partnership that literacy coaches maintain with classroom teachers is active inquiry and reflection in professional practice. The lessons I learnt as the coach reveal one possible pathway of professional growth for coaches. I used hedges to maintain a non-judgemental stance when proffering suggestions to teachers and this aligns with the humanistic role of coaching whereby a coach is empathetic and provides encouragement. Overall, my reflection tallies with the principle of a coach to sustain change, as identified by Sisson and Sisson (2017). According to them, the introspection and self-awareness of a literacy coach leads to greater informed actions and change. My revelation about the fact that I am on a learning continuum and learned to think on the spot when giving suggestions to teachers echoes Haneda *et al.*'s (2019) finding that novice coach discourse is more directed towards helping teachers address immediate needs rather than developing over time. This study also agrees with researchers who suggest that novice coaches require support in deconstructing and recognizing changes to their own professional identity and in their relationship with teachers through online preparation programmes and intentional discourse that specifies role-play shifts between responsive and directive stances (Ortmann, Brodeur, and Massey 2020). These findings indicate that comparable approaches to e-coaching may be suitable for other contexts with access to technology in the Global South as a means for both teachers and teacher educators to develop together sustainably in challenging circumstances.

Conclusion

It is evident from this study that ESL teachers in Nigeria, like many across sub-Saharan Africa and the wider Global South, need authentic opportunities to develop professionally. These teachers in low-resource contexts grapple with the challenges of teaching effectively due to insufficient training and overpopulated classrooms. This study's primary objective has highlighted the challenges faced by these teachers and how e-coaching met their immediate needs both directly (e.g. by involving the students more in the classroom) and indirectly (e.g. making the teachers more conscious about the needs of their students through co-planning and video observation and subsequent discussion). Despite the few technical issues addressed and the effect of video observation on teachers and students highlighted here, more active student participation was nonetheless reported by teachers as a result of the intervention. Despite only having initial training as a mentor, the novice coach's limited expertise nevertheless facilitated exploration of meaningful learning experiences and addressed the proposition that e-coaching is feasible in Nigeria and comparable contexts in the Global South if adequate planning and training is invested in its implementation.

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