



BEYOND ACCESS: PEDAGOGY, INTERACTION, AND INSTITUTIONAL READINESS IN VLE-MEDIATED FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

The growing use of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) in Nigerian universities signals a broader shift toward technology-supported instruction in foreign language programs. This study investigates how effectively VLEs facilitate meaningful language learning, with particular attention to pedagogy, learner interaction, and institutional readiness. Drawing on a qualitative document analysis and guided by Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Sociocultural Theory, relevant scholarly literature and institutional documents were examined. The findings show that although VLEs enhance access to learning materials and provide flexible learning opportunities, their contribution to communicative competence remains limited. This limitation stems from content-driven instructional practices, low levels of interaction, insufficient instructor training, and persistent infrastructural and policy challenges. The study concludes that the effectiveness of VLEs in foreign language education relies not on the mere presence of technology but on purposeful pedagogical integration and sustained institutional support.

Keywords: Virtual Learning Environments; Foreign Language Acquisition; Nigerian Universities; Communicative Language Teaching; Sociocultural Theory

1.0 Introduction

The adoption of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) in higher education has accelerated worldwide as institutions seek flexible, technology-mediated solutions to expand access to learning and support 21st-century skills (Chinedu-Eze & Bello, 2018; Chiekezie & Okafor, 2025). In Nigeria,

universities increasingly invest in VLEs to complement in-person teaching, driven by digital transformation agendas and the need to accommodate growing student populations in resource-constrained contexts (Chinedu-Eze & Bello, 2018; Chiekezie & Okafor, 2025). This integration is particularly salient for foreign language education, where

virtual tools can broaden access to authentic input, enable collaboration beyond classroom walls, and offer flexible opportunities for interaction (Ukume, Edu, & Uguma, 2025).

Despite these promises, empirical reports indicate persistent challenges in Nigerian universities: inconsistent availability of virtual services, insufficient infrastructure, limited student access, and underutilization of VLE features (Ajiboye & Ngwakwe, 2023). Instructors often receive inadequate support and training in educational technology, limiting their capacity to design interactive tasks and facilitate online engagement (Chinedu-Eze & Bello, 2018; Akukwe, Nwoke, Nwaneri, & Okorie, 2022). These conditions raise questions about the extent to which VLEs are employed to foster communicative competence and socially mediated learning, rather than serving primarily as content repositories.

This study critically examines the role of VLEs in foreign language acquisition in Nigerian universities. Guided by CLT and Sociocultural Theory, it considers the intersection of pedagogical practice, learner interaction, and institutional readiness to identify both the potential and the limitations of VLE adoption for developing foreign language proficiency.

Research questions: (RQ1) How are VLEs currently deployed in foreign language programs in Nigerian universities—as content repositories or as interactive spaces aligned with CLT? (RQ2) In what ways do institutional conditions (infrastructure, policy, and support) enable or constrain communicative and sociocultural dimensions of VLE-mediated learning? (RQ3) To what

extent do pedagogical practices within VLEs align with CLT principles and SCT constructs, including interaction, mediation, scaffolding, and the Zone of Proximal Development?

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Virtual Learning Environments in Higher Education

Virtual Learning Environments (e.g., Moodle, Blackboard, Canvas) mediate teaching, communication, assessment, and learner management, extending learning beyond physical classrooms (Dillenbourg, 2000). While VLEs are associated with flexibility, autonomy, and resource access, their pedagogical value depends on integration into coherent instructional designs rather than mere technological availability. In Nigeria, adoption has grown in response to enrolment pressures and digitization policies, yet usage patterns are often supplementary and uneven across programs (Chinedu-Eze & Bello, 2018; Chiekezie & Okafor, 2025).

2.2 VLEs and Foreign Language Acquisition

In foreign language education, VLEs can support interaction, multimodal input, task-based collaboration, and timely feedback—features aligned with CLT's emphasis on meaning-focused communication and authentic language use (Chapelle, 2001; Richards, 2006). Studies in EFL contexts suggest positive impacts on reading, writing, and vocabulary when platforms are intentionally designed to promote participation and interaction (Herrera, 2024). However, in many Nigerian programs, digital tools function primarily as content repositories, limiting opportunities

for negotiation of meaning and communicative practice (Ukume et al., 2025).

2.3 Pedagogical Practices, Instructor Preparedness, and Policy

Instructor attitudes and digital pedagogy competence strongly shape VLE effectiveness (Akukwe et al., 2022). In Nigerian universities, limited professional development opportunities constrain the design and facilitation of interactive tasks and feedback cycles, resulting in the replication of didactic lectures online (Chinedu-Eze & Bello, 2018). At the institutional level, unstable electricity, limited bandwidth, and weak policy frameworks undermine consistent engagement with VLEs and lead to fragmented implementation (Ajiboye & Ngwakwe, 2023; Chiekezie & Okafor, 2025).

3.0 Theoretical Framework

3.1 Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

CLT positions communicative competence—appropriate and effective language use in context—as the central goal of instruction (Hymes, 1972; Richards, 2006). Key constructs guiding our analysis include interaction, negotiation of meaning, authentic tasks, learner autonomy, and formative feedback. Within VLEs, CLT invites scrutiny of whether platforms facilitate collaborative, meaning-focused tasks or merely transmit content.

3.2 Sociocultural Theory (SCT) and Mediated Learning

SCT conceptualizes learning as socially situated and mediated by cultural tools, signs, and interaction (Vygotsky, 1978; Lantolf &

Thorne, 2006). Central constructs include mediation, scaffolding, and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). In VLE contexts, these constructs foreground how tools and institutional arrangements enable or constrain guided participation, feedback, and collaborative activity.

3.3 Integrating CLT and SCT in VLE-Mediated Language Learning

Combining CLT and SCT enables analysis of both instructional intent (tasks, interaction) and interactional realities (mediation, scaffolding) within institutional conditions. This dual lens is well-suited to contexts where technological adoption often outpaces pedagogical adaptation, as is frequently the case in Nigerian universities.

4.0 Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, document-based design to interrogate how VLEs mediate foreign language learning in Nigerian universities. Document analysis supports the systematic, contextual interpretation of texts to surface patterns in pedagogy, interaction, and institutional readiness (Bowen, 2009).

4.2 Data Sources and Selection

The corpus comprised peer-reviewed articles, institutional policy documents, and program guidelines relevant to VLE use in Nigerian higher education and to language pedagogy in digital contexts. Sources were identified through searches of databases (e.g., Google Scholar, publisher repositories) using Boolean strings such as: ("virtual learning

environment" OR "learning management system" OR "e-learning") AND (Nigeria) AND (language OR foreign OR EFL). Inclusion criteria required (a) substantive focus on VLEs in Nigerian HE or language learning in digital contexts; (b) publication by reputable venues (peer-reviewed journals, official institutional reports); and (c) availability in English. Documents without explicit relevance to VLE-mediated pedagogy or interaction were excluded.

4.3 Analytical Framework and Coding Trustworthiness and Ethics

Trustworthiness was enhanced via triangulation across document types, maintenance of a reflexive analytic memo trail, and transparent reporting of inclusion criteria and procedures (Bowen, 2009). Ethical standards were observed by accurate representation of authors' claims and adherence to citation conventions. As the analysis drew on publicly available documents, no human subjects were involved.

5.0 Results and Discussion

5.1 VLEs as Repositories Rather than Interactive Learning Ecologies

Across the reviewed studies, Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) are predominantly deployed as repositories for lecture notes, recorded sessions, and assessment materials. While this model significantly enhances accessibility, temporal flexibility, and resource archiving (Chinedu-Eze & Bello, 2018), it rarely extends into

sustained interactive engagement. The emphasis on content hosting reflects a transitional phase of digital adoption rather than a fully integrated pedagogical transformation.

From a Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) perspective, repository-centric implementation restricts opportunities for meaning-focused communication, authentic task performance, and negotiation of meaning (Hymes, 1972). Similarly, within a Sociocultural Theory (SCT) framework, digital platforms function primarily as storage tools rather than as mediational artefacts that support guided participation and collaborative problem-solving (Vygotsky, 1978). However, the existing infrastructure demonstrates latent potential: discussion forums, breakout rooms, peer-review systems, and collaborative writing tools remain underutilized resources that could shift VLEs from passive storage systems to interactive language-learning ecologies.

5.2 Instructor Digital Pedagogy and Feedback Practices

The literature consistently highlights insufficient professional development in digital pedagogy (Akukwe et al., 2022; Chinedu-Eze & Bello, 2018). Many instructors replicate traditional lecture-driven approaches in online spaces, resulting in limited learner engagement and reduced dialogic interaction. Feedback mechanisms are often delayed, generalized, or assessment-focused rather than formative and developmental.

Within CLT, this limits task authenticity, communicative spontaneity, and learner

autonomy. From an SCT standpoint, it constrains scaffolding processes and restricts learners' movement within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Nevertheless, the findings suggest that the challenge lies not in resistance but in capacity. Where instructors receive targeted support in task design, digital facilitation, and feedback cycles, interaction levels improve. This indicates that pedagogical reorientation—rather than technological replacement—is central to improving outcomes.

5.3 Learner Interaction and Engagement Constraints

Learner participation is further shaped by infrastructural realities, including unstable internet connectivity, inconsistent access to digital devices, and limited instructor presence (Ajiboye & Ngwakwe, 2023). These factors disrupt continuity in communicative exchanges and reduce sustained peer collaboration.

CLT emphasizes that language competence develops through active interaction, while SCT underscores the role of social mediation in cognitive development. When interaction becomes episodic rather than continuous, opportunities for negotiation of meaning, corrective feedback, and collaborative construction of knowledge diminish. Yet, evidence suggests that even low-bandwidth strategies—such as structured asynchronous forums, audio-based feedback, and peer discussion threads—can sustain interaction when systematically embedded into course design.

5.4 Task Design and Communicative Depth

An additional pattern emerging from the reviewed literature concerns the nature of tasks integrated into VLE platforms. Many online activities remain heavily form-focused, emphasizing grammar drills, comprehension checks, and individual written submissions. While such exercises support structural accuracy, they rarely require extended discourse production or collaborative problem-solving. This limits exposure to authentic communicative situations and reduces opportunities for learners to engage in spontaneous language negotiation.

From a CLT perspective, communicative competence involves not only grammatical control but also discourse management, sociolinguistic appropriateness, and strategic competence. Tasks that do not require interactional adjustment or negotiation fail to activate these competencies. SCT similarly posits that learning develops through socially organized activity. When tasks remain individualized and detached from peer collaboration, opportunities for co-construction of meaning and scaffolded progression are constrained.

5.5 Patterns of Learner Autonomy and Agency

The findings also suggest that VLE implementation influences learner agency. In repository-dominated environments, learners tend to assume passive roles—downloading materials, submitting assignments, and responding to isolated prompts. Opportunities for self-initiated dialogue, peer feedback, and collaborative meaning-making are limited.

However, where instructors deliberately embed discussion threads, peer-review mechanisms, and group-based assignments, learners demonstrate greater participation and ownership of communicative tasks. This aligns with CLT's emphasis on learner-centered communication and SCT's assertion that agency develops within structured social interaction. The degree of autonomy observed is therefore contingent on interactional design rather than inherent platform limitations.

5.6 Institutional Policy and Structural Alignment

Institutional frameworks often prioritize technological adoption without equivalent investment in pedagogical alignment. Studies point to inconsistent policy directives, uneven infrastructure provision, and limited recognition of the distinct requirements of language instruction (Chiekezie & Okafor, 2025). Language teaching demands sustained oral interaction, formative feedback loops, and cultural mediation—elements that require intentional design within digital platforms.

Where institutional policies treat VLE adoption as a compliance measure rather than a pedagogical transformation, implementation remains symbolic. Both CLT and SCT stress that learning environments must be interaction-rich and socially mediated. Without structural alignment—clear guidelines, workload adjustments, technical support, and pedagogical training—VLE integration cannot fully support communicative competence development.

5.7 Synthesis

The findings indicate that VLEs have significantly expanded access and flexibility but have not consistently translated into measurable gains in communicative competence within the reviewed context. The principal constraint is not technological insufficiency but limited pedagogy-driven integration.

When VLEs are conceptualized merely as digital repositories, they underperform in fostering interaction, mediation, and scaffolded learning. However, when designed around communicative tasks, collaborative problem-solving, and structured feedback cycles, they align closely with both CLT and SCT principles. The transition required is therefore conceptual rather than infrastructural: from technology adoption to pedagogical transformation.

In sum, the effectiveness of VLEs in language education depends on institutional support, instructors' digital competence, and intentional design of interactions. Their potential lies not in content distribution alone but in their capacity to mediate communicative engagement and scaffold language development within digitally structured social spaces.

6.0 Results and Discussion

VLEs as Repositories Rather than Interactive Spaces. Across the reviewed sources, VLEs are predominantly used to host lecture notes, recordings, and assessment materials. While this expands access and flexibility (Chinedu-Eze & Bello, 2018), it yields limited opportunities for interaction or task-based collaboration. From a CLT perspective, repository-centric use constrains

meaning-focused communication and negotiation of meaning; from an SCT lens, it underutilizes tools as mediational artefacts for guided participation (Hymes, 1972; Vygotsky, 1978).

Instructor Digital Pedagogy and Feedback. Studies highlight insufficient training and support for instructors to design and facilitate interactive online tasks and feedback cycles (Akukwe et al., 2022; Chinedu-Eze & Bello, 2018). In practice, lecture-style delivery is replicated online, with minimal scaffolding. In CLT terms, this weakens task authenticity and learner autonomy; in SCT terms, it limits scaffolding and movement within the ZPD (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

Learner Interaction and Engagement Constraints. Irregular access to platforms, unstable connectivity, and low instructor presence reduces sustained learner interaction (Ajiboye & Ngwakwe, 2023). This diminishes exposure to peer collaboration and feedback, thereby weakening the social processes through which language develops. CLT underscores the centrality of interaction; SCT emphasizes mediation through participation in meaningful activity.

Institutional Policy and Infrastructure. Persistent infrastructural constraints and uneven policy guidance restrict consistent engagement and coherent implementation (Chiekezie & Okafor, 2025). Without institutional recognition of the distinct demands of language teaching—oral interaction, formative feedback, cultural mediation—VLE adoption remains largely symbolic, limiting both CLT-aligned practice and SCT-oriented mediation.

Synthesis. VLEs demonstrably enhance access and flexibility but have not, in the reviewed context, translated into systematic gains in communicative competence. The central barrier is not technology per se but the absence of pedagogy-led integration and institutional arrangements that enable interaction, mediation, and scaffolding.

7.0 Recommendations

Curriculum redesign with digital communicative outcomes. Actor: Departments of Foreign Languages. Indicator: All 100-/200-level modules specify at least two VLE-mediated communicative tasks (with peer feedback) per semester.

Adopt blended learning models. Actor: Faculty Boards/Senate. Indicator: Each core language module integrates scheduled face-to-face interaction plus structured online tasks aligned to CLT (discussion forums, collaborative writing, role-plays).

Develop context-specific digital language resources. Actor: Departments in collaboration with ICT Units. Indicator: Repository of locally relevant multimedia/task modules mapped to syllabus outcomes and accessible offline where feasible.

Strengthen learner digital literacy and autonomy. Actor: Academic Planning/Library/ICT Units. Indicator: Orientation micro-modules on online collaboration, feedback etiquette, and self-regulated learning embedded in first-year curricula.

Institutional collaboration and resource sharing. Actor: Inter-university consortia (federal/state). Indicator: Shared instances or

federated access to VLE plugins for language learning; periodic exchange of best-practice task banks.

Continuous monitoring and pedagogical evaluation. Actor: Quality Assurance Units. Indicator: Annual reviews of VLE-based language courses focusing on interaction metrics, task alignment to CLT, and student feedback to inform iterative improvement.

8.0 Conclusion

This study examined how VLEs mediate foreign language acquisition in Nigerian universities through the combined lenses of CLT and SCT. While platforms have broadened access and afforded flexibility, their pedagogical potential remains underutilized. Content-centric practices, limited interaction, insufficient instructor mediation, and weak institutional support constrain communicative competence. The evidence suggests that effective VLE use in language education depends on pedagogy-driven integration and institutional arrangements that enable interaction, mediation, and scaffolding, rather than on technological availability alone.

Future work should complement document analysis with classroom observations, learning analytics from VLE logs, and design-based research that iteratively refines and evaluates CLT-aligned tasks in real contexts.

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