Training Language Teachers in a Vuca World

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ABSTRACT: Amidst today's rapidly changing and unpredictable world, the field of language teaching faces unique challenges. In a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) environment, language teachers need to possess a diverse skill set to effectively navigate the ever-evolving landscape of language education. This study delved into the significance of training language teachers in a VUCA world and highlighted key strategies training institutions need to equip teachers with the necessary tools for successful language education. A qualitative methodology underpinned the study, carried out through a case study investigation. Participants were purposefully selected and consisted of language lecturers and student teachers specialising in language education at the case study institution. Data were collected with open-ended questionnaires and analysed by establishing emerging themes. The study established that language teachers need to be trained with diverse skills to effectively teach learners during VUCA times. This can be achieved by equipping teachers with the necessary skills, knowledge, and adaptability to help learners improve their language proficiency and intercultural competence. To achieve this goal, teachers should be empowered and equipped with the latest teaching methodologies and technological advancements. Teachers should also create an engaging and inclusive language learning environments that prepare learners for the challenges and opportunities of the intercultural world.

KEYWORDS: language teachers, language learning, teacher training, VUCA, intercultural world, language education, intercultural competencies

1. INTRODUCTION

Amidst today's rapidly changing and unpredictable world, the field of language teaching faces unique challenges. In a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) environment, language teachers need to possess a diverse skill set to effectively navigate the ever-evolving landscape of language education. The COVID-19 pandemic has raised concerns about the training of language teachers. Although uncertainty is not new to education, the level of uncertainty caused by this pandemic was unprecedented, especially in the field of language teaching. UNESCO and other educational organisations have stressed the importance of preparing students for a VUCA world. For that, Wang (2019) opines that achieving success in education in the 21st century requires more than just cognitive development. Learners must also acquire competencies such as the ability to seek and synthesize information critically and take charge of their own learning. This is because the world is facing unprecedented complex challenges and problems, and learners need to be well-prepared to tackle real-life challenges (Yaccob, et al, 2023). To navigate the VUCA world, institutions that train language teachers should take a proactive approach and implement a variety of activities that focus on developing students' socio-cultural and language competencies and skills in dealing with real-life problems. Learning a language is not just about developing linguistic skills, but also about understanding the cultural background and learning the content of the language. Therefore, language teachers should be trained in a way that enables them to create meaningful learning experiences for language learners by incorporating interesting global content into their lessons (Baimanova et al, 2020).

In a world that is rapidly globalising, students need to think more critically and deal with conflicts and competition in their careers (Wright and Zhu, 2018). The challenges brought about by globalisation and global education require teachers with sufficient pedagogical knowledge, skills, and dispositions in language teaching and learning. Teachers should understand the future needs and be ready to support planning and adaptation in the VUCA environment of education, despite the challenges it poses. In unprecedented times, institutions should prepare students for the working world by teaching them how to think critically and deal with the rising challenges.

Therefore, for language students to effectively learn languages in authentic and real-life contexts, teacher training institutions should align their curriculum to include more international and global topics. This requires future language teachers to have a strong foundation in subject matter, general pedagogy, pedagogical content, learners and learning, curriculum, and educational philosophies (Chong and Yamat, 2021). By being well-trained and confident, future language teachers can design the new VUCA environment

to meet current educational trends. It is against this background that this study explored the significance of training language teachers in a VUCA world with the aim of highlighting key strategies training institutions need to use in equipping language teachers with the necessary tools for successful language teaching and learning within a VUCA context.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Teacher training institutions have the responsibility to prepare their students to communicate effectively, collaborate with others, and actively participate in challenging and competitive environments. Therefore, it's crucial to begin preparing student teachers for uncertainty at the training level so that they are ready to embrace the VUCA environment. Language teachers face various challenges, and they must constantly adapt to the evolving educational landscape by using innovative teaching methods and updating their pedagogical approaches. However, there is a lack of comprehensive research on the most effective strategies and resources for training language teachers in Namibia for the VUCA world. Therefore, this study intends to emphasise the importance of training language teachers in the VUCA world and highlight the key strategies that training institutions should adopt to equip language teachers with the necessary tools to succeed in the VUCA environment and provide high-quality language education to their learners.

3. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The following objectives guided the study:
1. To explore the challenges facing the training of language teachers during the VUCA times.
2. To suggest measures for improving the training of language teachers during VUCA times.

4. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research methodology underpinned the study, carried out through a case study investigation. Participants were purposefully selected and formed a sample of five language lecturers and fifteen final-year student-teachers specialising in language education at the case study institution. Data were collected with open-ended questionnaires and analysed by establishing emerging themes. The interpretation and discussion of the data provided the following findings.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the data yielded the thematic areas, phrased in relation to the key objectives that guided the study. The themes are discussed next, starting with themes relating to challenges experienced by training institutions in VUCA times, and then succeeded by the discussion of themes related to intervention measures for improving teaching and learning of languages in a VUCA environment.

5.1 Challenges facing teaching and learning in a VUCA environment

The teaching and learning in a VUCA environment was faced by numerous challenges as discussed below.

Technology advancements

The majority of the participants revealed that the biggest challenge they face is the lack of advanced technology in their institution. The students have limited access to computers, as the available computers are not enough and often not functional. Advanced technology plays a crucial role in providing language teachers with wide-ranging resources, such as online language learning platforms, interactive multimedia materials, and virtual classrooms (Choi & Chung, 2021). Without these resources, lecturers face difficulties in finding relevant and up-to-date materials, which hinders their ability to effectively engage and educate their students. In today's VUCA world, technology is vital, and teachers must be proficient in using educational technology to its fullest potential.

Lecturer participants expressed their dissatisfaction with the slow internet speed and unreliable internet connection in their lecture halls. This made them hesitant to rely on the internet while teaching in class. As a result, they would prepare and download teaching materials in advance before coming to lecture halls. These findings are consistent with those of (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020), who found that subpar technology such as technical issues, slow internet speeds, or limited access to online learning platforms can hinder effective teaching and learning. These problems can have a negative impact on student engagement and learning outcomes. As a result, language lecturers may find it difficult to create interactive and dynamic online learning experiences, which can lead to reduced student motivation and fewer opportunities for language practice and interaction.

Many participants raised concerns about the challenges institutions face in incorporating technology into language teaching. Resistance from some lecturers who fear the unknown or prefer traditional teaching methods is a significant obstacle. This resistance hinders the adoption and integration of technology in language classrooms. Participants explained that integrating technology into language teaching requires time, resources, and support from the institution. However, lecturers often struggle to access the necessary support from the ICT department on time, which makes it challenging to embrace technology in their lecture halls. This finding is in line with Hameed and Hashim (2022), who stated that many teachers are usually uncertain and apprehensive about using tablets and other technologies due to a lack of understanding or confidence, as well as concerns about the potential risks associated with technological devices.

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Flexible and adapting teaching approaches

In today's (VUCA) times, language teachers need to be highly adaptable. They need to be proactive in their approach towards developing their skills to prepare for the challenges of the rapidly globalising world. However, some lecturers and students are resistant to change, which presents a challenge to adaptability. Student participants highlighted that some lecturers are not willing to cater for diverse learning styles, accommodate different language proficiency levels, and provide personalised instruction to students, which are essential considerations in addressing the changing needs of the students, especially given the evolving VUCA environment. Additionally, lecturers reported inadequate support from management during the COVID-19 pandemic, including a lack of additional training to help them adapt their teaching methods to accommodate the changes brought about by uncertain times. The COVID-19 pandemic has further necessitated the need for lecturers to be flexible and adaptable in their teaching methods. To adapt to evolving student needs, language lecturers need to undergo ongoing professional development and have a willingness to adjust their teaching strategies accordingly. This is in line with the views of (Wright & Zhu, 2018), who highlighted that to thrive in a VUCA world, lecturers need to adapt their teaching methods to accommodate the changing educational landscape. It is, therefore, crucial to educate students on how to adapt to changing educational landscape.

Resilience

During VUCA times, resilience has been identified as a significant challenge in the training of language teachers. The lecturer participants shared that they faced various difficulties, including adapting to new teaching methodologies, integrating technology into their lessons, and catering to the needs of a diverse range of students. These challenges led to feelings of being overwhelmed, stressed, burnt out, and a lack of confidence in their teaching work. One of the lecturer participants explained that during the COVID-19 pandemic, she felt that she was failing her students because she was supposed to be a role model and teach them how to navigate setbacks and bounce back from adversity. Unfortunately, she was struggling herself and failed to create a supportive and nurturing learning environment for her students to thrive. The findings are in support with (Yaccob et al., 2023) who indicated that studying in VUCA times is very overwhelming, leading to burnout and demotivation of lecturers and teachers.

Diverse and multicultural classrooms

The increasing diversity of students in VUCA times brings along with it a wide range of cultural backgrounds, languages, learning styles, and educational needs. This complexity puts additional pressure on lecturers to adapt their teaching approaches to cater to the diverse needs of their students. Lecturer participants explained that one of the challenges faced in training language teachers during VUCA times is ensuring that they possess the necessary cultural competence and sensitivity to effectively engage with students from different backgrounds. Language lecturers should know and respect the cultural norms, values, and communication styles of their students. Continuous professional development and training are essential to enhance lecturer's intercultural communication skills and understanding. One of the participants alluded to the fact that the VUCA nature of the educational landscape, such as COVID-19 pandemic, added a layer of complexity to teaching in diverse and multicultural classrooms. Therefore, lecturers faced uncertainties related to curriculum changes, assessment methods, and evolving educational policies. Language lecturers must stay updated with the latest research and best practices in language teaching while being flexible and adaptable to meet the changing needs of their students' learning needs. As the Omora and Akwongo (2022) emphasised, it is crucial for teacher training institutions to comprehend the challenges and requirements that language lecturers and students encounter during crises. These institutions must provide them with useful technical and instructional support to help them redesign curricula and pedagogical practices, which can ultimately lead to sustainable language teaching and learning.

5.2 Measures for improving the training of language teachers during VUCA times

In order to prepare future language teachers for the VUCA world, it is essential to equip them with digital literacy skills. Technology has completely transformed language teaching, offering new opportunities for interaction, collaboration, and personalised learning. Language lecturers must be proficient in utilising various digital tools and resources to enhance their teaching methods and engage students (Choi & Chung, 2021). Therefore, teacher training institutions should ensure that they are technologically well equipped in terms of the technological devices and better internet connectivity. Proper training should provide lecturers with the technical skills required to navigate online platforms, create multimedia content, and implement blended learning approaches. Additionally, language lecturers should be trained on how to navigate the digital landscape ethically, ensuring the privacy and security of their students.

There is a need for teacher training institutions to prioritise the development of teachers' skills in designing and delivering lessons that encourage student agency, autonomy, and self-directed learning. Aspiring teachers must be motivated to experiment with various teaching techniques and adapt them according to the individual needs of each learner. Additionally, training programs should enable lecturers to stay up to date with the current trends and advancements in language teaching and integrate innovative methods and technologies into their teaching.

Resilience is a crucial trait for both lecturers and students in VUCA times. Teacher training programs can help lecturers develop resilience by equipping them with strategies to manage stress, cope with challenges, and maintain a positive mindset. Resilient

lecturers serve as role models for their students, teaching them how to navigate setbacks and bounce back from adversity. By enhancing their own resilience, lecturers can create a supportive and nurturing environment for students to thrive.

In the current VUCA world, one of the crucial aspects of training language teachers is to equip them with the necessary skills to teach in diverse and multicultural classrooms. With the rise of globalisation, classrooms are becoming more multicultural, with learners from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds. It is essential for language teachers to develop intercultural competence and sensitivity to ensure inclusive education and effective communication in intercultural settings. Therefore, teacher training programs should focus on fostering intercultural competencies, promoting critical thinking, and encouraging open-mindedness to facilitate a better understanding and appreciation of diverse perspectives.

6. CONCLUSION

The training of language teaching has undergone a significant transformation in recent years due to the emergence of a VUCA world. Understanding the challenges will ensure that relevant measures are considered to address them and improve the training of language student-teachers. To effectively tackle these challenges, it is imperative to provide language teachers with training that equips them to navigate this VUCA world.

Additionally, it is also crucial to prioritise the training and professional development of lecturers in times of VUCA. This ensures lecturers remain effective, adaptable, and resilient in their roles. By investing in continuous learning for language lecturers, institutions can equip them with the skills and knowledge required to navigate an ever-changing educational landscape. Ultimately, this investment benefits students by providing them with a quality education that prepares them for the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. Embracing training during VUCA times is a necessity for building a strong and sustainable education system.

As we move forward, it is important to recognise the critical role of language lecturers in the pursuit of training future language teachers. Teacher training institutions should support them in their pursuit of continuous learning for successful language teaching and learning within a VUCA context.

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