

## **SOCIAL SKILL DEVELOPMENT FOR ENHANCING COLLABORATION AMONG LEARNERS IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAMME IN ENUGU STATE**

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### **Abstract**

The study focused on social skill development for enhancing collaboration among learners in open and distance learning programme in Enugu State. The study was guided by two specific purposes and two research questions. Descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. The population of the study was 5,052 respondents, comprising 3563 learners in National Open University of Nigeria, 646 learners in Center for Distance Learning University of Nigeria, and 843 learners in National Teachers Institute. The sample size for the study was 654 learners sampled through simple random sampling technique by balloting. The instrument for data collection was the researchers' self-developed questionnaire titled Social Skill Development for Enhancing Collaboration among Learners in Open and Distance Learning Programme (SSDCLODLP). The instrument for data collection was validated by three experts. The instrument has overall reliability of 0.85 calculated using Cronbach Alpha method. The data for this study was collected solely by the researchers through Google Form. The data collected for the study were analysed using mean and standard deviation to analyse research questions. The findings of this study showed that verbal communication enhances collaboration among learners in open and distance learning programme in Enugu State; also emotional intelligence enhanced collaboration among learners in open and distance learning programme in Enugu State was high. Based on the findings of the study it was recommended among others that educational institutions and distance learning programme coordinators in Enugu State should invest in and promote the use of reliable synchronous communication tools such as video conferencing, voice calls, and interactive webinars.

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**Keywords:** Social skill development, learners, open distance learning programme

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### **Introduction**

The rapid growth of technology in the twenty-first century has brought great advancement into open and distance learning (ODL) programmes in Nigeria. It has notably expanded educational access globally in many countries. This mode of learning according to Cleveland-Innes (2018) has gained significance importance due to its flexibility, accessibility and the use of technology to bridge geographical barriers, and cost effectiveness. Many Nigerian institutions offer open and distance learning programmes such as national Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) in Abuja, University of Ibadan Distance Learning Centre, University of Lagos Distance Learning Institute. Including ODL in institution's in Enugu State, However, this mode of learning often lacks the interpersonal interactions inherent in traditional classroom settings, which are essential for developing social skills vital for effective collaboration among learners. Okolie et al., (2021) stated that learners who possess strong social skills are better equipped to participate in group activities, share knowledge, and engage in meaningful discussions. Despite the increased adoption of digital learning technologies, many learners in ODL, Enugu State still face challenges in acquiring these competencies. Azubuike, Adegboye, and Quadri (2020) found that approximately 60% of

Nigerian learners lacked access to digital resources, limiting their ability to participate in collaborative learning opportunities effectively.

Social skills are essential for effective interpersonal interactions and collaboration in educational settings. Social skills are essential for forming social connections at various life stages, facilitating adaptability, establishing and maintaining relationships (Udoka, 2019). These skills have both immediate and long-term impacts on an individual's life, enabling learning to build successful relationships, aid in school readiness, and improve adaptation to formal school settings. Nangle et al. (2010) stated that social skills is a specific abilities or behaviours that allow for effective responses in social tasks, differentiating them from the broader concept of social competence. Social skills encompass behaviours such as initiating conversations, understanding emotions, and appropriate eye contact, which are crucial for successful social interaction. Contextually, social skill development refers to the process by which learners in open and distance learning programmes acquire and enhance specific interpersonal abilities such as effective communication, empathy, teamwork, and conflict resolution that facilitate collaborative learning. Although there are different types of social skills, this work concentrated on verbal communication and emotional intelligence.

Verbal communication involves the use of spoken or written words to convey messages and facilitate understanding among individuals. Friedman (2019) stated that verbal communication is described as the exchange of information through spoken words or written messages, encompassing both oral and written forms. This perspective highlights the importance of shared language and mutual understanding between the sender and receiver to ensure effective communication. Verbal communication includes any interaction that utilises words to communicate information, allowing for the clear expression of thoughts, ideas, and emotions (IONOS, 2023). In this study, verbal communication is defined as the intentional use of spoken or written language by learners to convey information, share ideas, and collaborate effectively within open and distance learning environments. Verbal communication enhances collaboration among learners in ODL programmes. It facilitates the clear articulation of ideas, active participation in discussions, and effective feedback mechanisms, all of which are essential for collaborative learning. Active listening is a critical aspect of verbal communication, enables learners to engage meaningfully with peers, fostering a collaborative learning environment. By attentively listening and responding to others' contributions, learners can build on shared knowledge and achieve common academic goals (Hoppe & Hoppe, 2007).

In distance learning settings, where face-to-face interaction is limited, verbal communication through synchronous tools such as video calls, voice chats, and teleconferencing bridges the gap, enabling learners to engage actively with peers and instructors (Morrison, 2020). Effective verbal communication enhances learners' understanding, reduces misunderstandings, and builds trust—key factors that promote successful collaboration (Singh & Thurman, 2019). Verbal interactions during group discussions or presentations encourage feedback and clarification, fostering a collaborative culture that supports shared learning goals (Chen, 2021). Moreover, verbal communication supports the development of social presence in virtual learning communities. It allows learners to establish connections, build trust, and work effectively in teams, which is vital for sustaining engagement and motivation in ODL settings (IONOS, 2023). In distance learning programme in Enugu State, there are limited literature on verbal communication and collaboration among learners. Despite its importance, the specific impact of verbal communication on learner interaction and community building in ODL, among learners in Enugu State remains unclear, limiting the ability to design effective interventions to support

collaborative learning. It is necessary to examine this relationship to improve the learners' collaboration in ODL programmes. The learners' collaboration also need their emotional intelligence.

Emotional intelligence (EI) is increasingly recognized as a vital component in fostering effective collaboration among learners. Top Hat (2019) defined emotional intelligence as the capacity to recognize and regulate one's emotions, as well as influence the emotions of others. The emphasis here is on the importance of effective communication, empathy, and conflict resolution in interpersonal interactions. Murtoff (2025) stated that emotional intelligence is the ability to perceive, understand, express, and control emotions, facilitating thoughts and actions that consider emotional contexts. Emotional intelligence in ODL programme refer to the capacity of learners in ODL programmes to recognize, understand, and manage their own emotions, as well as to perceive and influence the emotions of others, thereby enhancing collaborative learning experiences. Emotional intelligence (EI) is an important factor in enhancing collaboration among learners in open and distance education. EI involves the ability to perceive, understand, regulate, and use emotions constructively in interpersonal interactions (Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 2018). High emotional intelligence among learners promotes empathy, effective conflict resolution, and stronger interpersonal relationships, all of which are vital for collaborative learning (Goleman, 2019). In ODL, learners with high EI are better equipped to navigate the social-emotional complexities that arise in virtual group work, such as misunderstandings and feelings of isolation (Rivera & Rice, 2020). These learners tend to communicate more effectively, demonstrate patience, and motivate peers, which contributes to a more cohesive learning community (Yusuf & Ahmad, 2021). Developing emotional intelligence can mitigate challenges related to remote learning, such as frustration or disengagement, thereby promoting sustained collaboration and academic success (Nwosu & Obi, 2023). Despite the increasing adoption of ODL programmes in Enugu State, there are limited literature of how emotional intelligence contributes to collaborative learning among learners in ODL programme. While EI is recognized as a vital component in facilitating effective communication and teamwork, its specific impact on collaboration within the ODL programme remains underexplored. Therefore, it is imperative to investigate the extent to which emotional intelligence enhances collaboration among learners in ODL programmes in Enugu State.

Collaboration is the engagement that takes place among learners, and among learners and facilitators. Padayichie (2023) described collaboration as the process where learners actively engage with peers to solve problems, share ideas, and construct knowledge collectively. This approach emphasizes the importance of interaction, mutual respect, and shared responsibility in the learning process. Kankaraš and Suarez-Alvarez (2019) stated that collaboration is the coordinated effort of individuals working together to achieve shared objectives, highlighting the significance of communication, trust, and the integration of diverse perspectives to enhance learning outcomes. Contextually, collaboration refers to the active engagement of learners in ODL programmes in Enugu State, Nigeria, working jointly with peers through effective communication and shared responsibilities to achieve common academic goals and enhance the overall learning experience. Distance learning programme refers to an educational approach where learners and instructors are physically separated by time and/or space, and instruction is delivered through various technological means, enabling access to education without requiring physical attendance at a traditional classroom (Moore, Dickson-Deane, & Galyen, 2018). According to Singh and Thurman (2019), a distance learning programme is a structured curriculum delivered remotely via digital platforms or

correspondence, designed to provide flexible learning opportunities that accommodate diverse learner needs and schedules. For the purpose of this discussion, distance learning programme is a formally organized educational process whereby teaching and learning activities occur with the physical separation of learners and educators, facilitated predominantly through online platforms, video lectures, digital resources, and virtual interactions.

Distance learning programme is characterised by physical separation. Here, learners and instructors are geographically separated, and interactions occur through electronic communication rather than face-to-face (Moore et al., 2018). Delivery of course content is mediated through various technological tools such as Learning Management Systems (LMS), video conferencing, email, and online forums (Singh & Thurman, 2019). Distance learning allows learners to access educational materials anytime and anywhere, accommodating different time zones, personal schedules, and pace of study (Dabbagh et al., 2020). Learners often have to exercise greater self-discipline and motivation to manage their learning process independently (Nikolova & Cukurova, 2021). Though not in person, effective distance learning programs incorporate synchronous (live sessions) and asynchronous (discussion boards, recorded lectures) communication to engage learners. Learners are individuals actively engaged in the process of acquiring knowledge, skills, attitudes, or competencies through study, experience, or instruction, characterized by their motivation and capacity to process new information (Illeris, 2019). According to Merriam and Bierema (2020), learners are people who intentionally participate in educational activities, both formal and informal, with the purpose of improving their understanding, behaviour, or skill. In this study, learners are seen as individuals who are consciously involved in educational activities, either independently or under guidance, aimed at acquiring new knowledge or skills, and who demonstrate active engagement and motivation throughout the learning process. Since collaboration is a necessity in any learning environment, this study seeks to examine the extent social skill development can enhance collaboration among learners in open and distance learning programme in Enugu State.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Open and distance learning (ODL) programmes have increasingly become a vital mode of education delivery in Enugu State. It offers flexibility and access to learners separated by time and space. However, the physical separation characteristic of ODL limits the natural opportunities for face-to-face interaction, which is essential for effective collaboration among learners. Effective collaboration in learning environments relies heavily on social skills, especially verbal communication and emotional intelligence, to facilitate meaningful learner interactions and foster a sense of community. Despite the recognized importance of verbal communication and emotional intelligence in supporting teamwork and collaboration, there is a paucity of research on how these social skills develop and impact collaborative learning specifically within ODL programmes in Enugu State. The limited literature on verbal communication's role in enhancing learner interaction and community building in virtual environments coupled with underexplored connections between emotional intelligence and collaboration, constrains the design of effective strategies to promote learner engagement and academic success in ODL settings. Furthermore, while collaboration is important for achieving shared academic goals, the extent to which social skill development enhances collaboration among learners in ODL programmes in Enugu State remains unclear. Without an understanding of how learners develop and apply social skills such as effective verbal communication, active listening, empathy, and conflict resolution within distance learning contexts, efforts to improve collaboration and overall learning experiences may be

inadequate. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the role of social skill development in enhancing collaboration among learners in ODL programmes in Enugu State, with a focus on verbal communication and emotional intelligence as key components influencing learner interaction and teamwork.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The general purpose of the study is to examine social skill development for enhancing collaboration among learners in open and distance learning programme in Enugu State. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Find out the extent to which verbal communication enhances collaboration among learners in open and distance learning programme in Enugu State.
2. Examine the extent to which emotional intelligence enhances collaboration among learners in open and distance learning programme in Enugu State.

### **Research Questions**

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent do verbal communication enhance collaboration among learners in open and distance learning programme in Enugu State.
2. To what extent do emotional intelligence enhance collaboration among learners in open and distance learning programme in Enugu State.

### **Method**

Descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. The population of the study was 5,052 respondents, comprising 3563 learners in National Open University of Nigeria, 646 learners in Center for Distance Learning University of Nigeria, and 843 learners in National Teachers Institute. The sample size for the study was 654 learners sampled through simple random sampling technique by balloting. The instrument for data collection was the researchers' self-developed questionnaire titled Social Skill Development for Enhancing Collaboration among Learners in Open and Distance Learning Programme (SSDCLODLP). The instrument was a 16-items questionnaire, divided into two clusters. Cluster 1 elicited information on the extent verbal communication enhances collaboration among learners in open and distance education programme in Enugu State. Cluster 2 elicited information on the extent emotional intelligence enhances collaboration among learners in Open and Distance learning programme in Enugu State. Four points rating scales of Very High Extent (VHE) – 4-points, High Extent (HE) – 3-points, Low Extent (LE) – 2-points and Very Low Extent (VLE) – 1-point, were used for the study. The instrument for data collection was validated by three experts. Two from the department of Continuing Education and Development Studies and one from Measurement and Evaluation Unit of Science Education, all from Faculty of Education University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The instrument has overall reliability of 0.85 calculated using Cronbach Alpha method. The data for this study was collected solely by the researchers through Google Form. The data collected for the study were analysed using mean and standard deviation to analyse research questions.

### **Results**

**Table 1: Extent verbal communication enhance collaboration among learners in open and distance learning programme in Enugu State**

S/N	Item Statement	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Enabling the sharing of ideas with other learners using online discussion tools.	3.40	.86	HE
2	Enhances understanding of course content during group	3.09	.52	HE

	discussion.			
3	Actively participating in online discussions that involve spoken or written interactions with peers.	3.42	.64	HE
4	Helping to organize group tasks effectively in Open and Distance Learning programmes.	3.24	.57	HE
5	Encouraging active participation and collaboration in group assignments.	3.54	.60	HE
6	Improving the quality of discussion during group projects.	3.78	.53	HE
7	Helping to clarify misunderstandings in group work.	3.05	.58	HE
8	Strengthening the sense of community among learners in Open and Distance Learning programme.	3.03	.56	HE
	<b>Cluster Mean</b>	<b>3.31</b>	<b>0.60</b>	<b>HE</b>

**Keys:** SD - Standard Deviation, HE – High Extent

Table 1 showed the extent verbal communication enhance collaboration among learners in open and distance learning programme in Enugu State. Data in table one showed that the mean ratings range between  $M = 3.03 - 3.78$  showing that all the items 1-8 in the clusters were accepted as high extent. Therefore, the grand mean score of 3.31 and SD of 0.60 showed that the extent verbal communication enhance collaboration among learners in open and distance learning programme in Enugu State was high.

**Table 2: Extent emotional intelligence enhance collaboration among learners in open and distance learning programme in Enugu State.**

S/N	Item Statement	Mean	SD	Decision
9	Understanding the emotions of other learners during group activities.	2.93	.45	HE
10	Managing emotions effectively during collaborative tasks.	3.08	.55	HE
11	Helping to resolve conflicts among group members by understanding their feelings.	3.07	.57	HE
12	Expressing empathy towards others during collaborative learning activities.	3.18	.67	HE
13	Considering the emotional needs of others when working on group tasks.	2.97	.62	HE
14	Building trust and respect in group discussions.	3.14	.64	HE
15	Motivating other learners during collaborative activities	3.62	.49	HE
16	Maintaining a positive atmosphere during group discussion.	3.21	.48	HE
	<b>Cluster Mean</b>	<b>3.15</b>	<b>0.56</b>	<b>HE</b>

**Keys:** SD - Standard Deviation, HE – High Extent

Table 2 revealed the extent emotional intelligence enhance collaboration among learners in open and distance learning programme in Enugu State. The table showed that the mean responses range between  $M = 2.93 - 3.62$ . Therefore, the grand mean score of 3.15 and SD of 0.56 showed that all the items in the cluster was accepted as high. Hence, the extent emotional intelligence enhance collaboration among learners in open and distance learning programme in Enugu State was high.

### Discussion

Findings from this study showed that verbal communication enhances collaboration among learners in open and distance learning programme in Enugu State to a high extent with a cluster mean of 3.31. This is in agreement with the findings of Johnson & Johnson (2019), that Verbal communication

clears expression of ideas, sharing of knowledge, and negotiation of meaning, which are essential for collaborative learning. In Enugu State, where infrastructural challenges limit face-to-face interactions, leveraging verbal communication via mobile phones or online platforms significantly enhances learner collaboration, ensuring that geographical barriers do not hinder educational engagement. in agreement with the findings of Okeke & Eze, (2022) as shown in the result of the study (Table 1). Also, finding from the study reveal that Emotional Intelligence enhances collaboration among learners in open and distance learning programme in Enugu State to a high extent with a cluster mean of 3.15 (Table 2). This is in line with the findings of Rivera & Rice (2020) as well as Yusuf and Ahmad (2021) who stated that high Emotional Learning better equipped learners to navigate the social-emotional complexities in group work such as understanding and feeling of isolation as well as being able to communicate more effectively and motivate peers, which contribute to a more cohesive learning community.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the findings of the study, it was concluded that verbal communication enhances collaboration among learners in open and distance learning programme in Enugu State high; and also emotional intelligence enhances collaboration among learners in open and distance learning programme in Enugu State.

### **Recommendations**

The following constitute the recommendations of the study:

1. Educational institutions and distance learning programme coordinators in Enugu State should invest in and promote the use of reliable synchronous communication tools such as video conferencing, voice calls, and interactive webinars. Providing training for both learners and instructors on effective verbal communication techniques can further strengthen collaboration, ensuring learners can express ideas clearly and engage actively despite geographical distances.
2. Distance learning programmes should incorporate emotional intelligence training modules aimed at helping learners develop skills in empathy, emotional regulation, and conflict resolution. This can be achieved through online workshops, peer mentoring, and reflective activities that build learners' emotional competencies, thereby promoting a supportive and collaborative learning environment that mitigates feelings of isolation and enhances teamwork.

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