



Students' perceptions of the quality of podcasts and vodcasts in teaching academic writing skills at a distance education institution

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ABSTRACT

First-year students in open distance e-learning institution often encounter challenges in academic writing. These difficulties contribute to higher dropout rates, increased failure rates, and delayed qualification completion. Key obstacles include inadequate adherence to academic writing conventions, difficulties generating appropriate content, issues with citation and referencing, and deficiencies in writing style. To address these issues, podcasts and vodcasts were introduced as supplementary support tools aimed at reducing transactional distance and increase collaborative teaching and learning interactions. The study involved 30,000 students from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. A qualitative research approach was employed, gathering data through online evaluation questions and focus group discussions. The findings revealed several challenges: poor sound quality resulting from weak voice projection, lecturers speaking too quickly, complex language usage, excessively long multimedia files, and information overload, all of which hindered comprehension. Based on students' feedback, a set of guidelines was developed to support both current and future lecturers in creating high-quality podcasts and vodcasts. These guidelines aim to enhance the academic writing skills of first-year students and promote a community of practice among lecturers. Key recommendations include maintaining a calm, audible, and neutral tone of voice, limiting the duration of podcasts and vodcasts to 15 minutes, using plain and straightforward language, simplifying module content, and providing transcriptions. By implementing these strategies, multimedia resources can become more effective and accessible, ultimately improving students' academic performance and retention.

Keywords: academic writing; first-year students' challenges; ODeL, podcasts; student support; vodcasts



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1. INTRODUCTION

A substantial body of current academic literature such as Bolton et al. (2023), Hassan et al. (2021), Lee (2020), Leibowitz (2004), Lentz (2020), Lentz and Foncha (2021), Pun, Thomas, and Bowen (2022), Sevnarayan and Mohale (2022), Sun, and Zhang (2022), Mohale (2023) and Welply (2023) have highlighted the myriad multifaceted challenges encountered by first-

year students in their pursuit of academic writing. In this paper, teaching academic writing skills was a major focus of the study. Therefore, it is essential to understand the challenges associated with academic writing. These challenges primarily emanate from inadequacies in their high school preparatory education. Commonly cited challenges encompass grammatical errors, superficial development of one's unique voice, structuring paragraphs [including the formulation of topic sentences, provision of supporting details with relevant examples, and crafting concluding sentences], lack of the art of essay composition, paraphrasing, summarisation, lack of citation and referencing practices, as well as high plagiarism tendencies (Alostath, 2021; AlMarwani, 2020; Cushing & Snell, 2022; Evans et al., 2020; Ma, 2021; Pantuso, 2022; Row, 2022; Williams, 2022). This study focuses on the English for Academic Writing [EAW101-pseudonym] module at UniX [pseudonym], which mirrors the academic writing challenges highlighted by previous scholars. To address these issues, EAW101 lecturers have implemented podcasts and vodcasts as supplementary tools, recognising students' diverse audio-visual learning styles [preferences]. These podcasts and vodcasts complement virtual classroom lectures, providing students with additional support mechanisms. Additionally, feedforward tutorial letters offering guidance on assignment approaches, feedback letters comprising assessment memoranda and areas requiring improvement, discussion forums, email-based inquiries, and a recently introduced student query platform called "Hot Questions" within the Moodle Learning Management System [LMS]. This research study assessed the effectiveness of podcasts and vodcasts in imparting academic writing skills, particularly in terms of their quality and their capacity to engage students. The term podcast refers to digitally compressed audio files that can be downloaded and played on personal devices. Similarly, a vodcast is a video-based version of a podcast, often described as "video on demand cast". These media formats offer convenient access to content, with podcasts focusing on audio and vodcasts incorporating visual elements. For further detailed elaborations, refer to the works of Crofts et al. (2005), Javier (2021), and Kiberg and Spilke (2023).

The EAW101 student cohort includes many individuals who use English as an Additional Language (EAL) for academic purposes. EAL students often face challenges in academic writing, such as difficulties with grammar, vocabulary, and structuring arguments (Farr, 2024; Taye & Mengesha, 2024). The diversity of the EAW101 student reflects the various ethnic and racial backgrounds represented within the group. Many of these students are pioneering the path as the first members of their families to pursue a university education. It is noteworthy that a substantial number of these students are concurrently engaged in part-time employment across diverse professional domains. This complex intersection of commitments compels a considerable portion of students to allocate their academic efforts to weekends, public holidays, scheduled leave days, and their commuting time to and from their workplaces. While a minority of students are employed on a permanent basis, the majority are in part-time work (Fynn, 2021). Given this multifaceted context, it becomes paramount to provide students with a support mechanism that is both accessible and intellectually stimulating. This approach is indispensable to ensuring their sustained engagement with the academic system and facilitating the attainment of their academic objectives. The incorporation of podcasts and vodcasts into the EAW101 module was a meticulously designed pedagogical strategy aimed at lessening the challenges associated with constant flipping through pages when studying academic writing. Through the integration of multimedia digital tools tailored for academic writing instruction, students stand to gain substantial advantages from these podcasts and vodcasts. The supplemental multimedia digital tools offer a dynamic and interactive learning experience that resonates with the unique circumstances and learning preferences of the EAW101 student body. To attain this objective, the ensuing research questions were formulated:

1. What are students' experiences of the quality of the podcasts they received?
2. What are students' experiences of the quality of the vodcasts they received? And,

3. What guidelines can be developed to enhance the quality of podcasts and vodcasts in an ODeL context?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Chaves-Yuste and de-la Peña (2023), Indahsari (2020), Rachmaniputri et al. (2021), Salsabila et al. (2021), and Xiangming (2020), podcasts in education have gained traction as an influential teaching strategy that can enhance academic writing skills, moreover, the teaching and learning process of ESL [English as a second language]. The creation and use of podcasts and vodcasts are particularly beneficial for improving linguistic competence. Advancements in technology and the influence of multimedia and virtual environments on students' lives have led educational institutions and lecturers to seek out new tools and strategies for teaching and learning target languages. Technological tools, particularly audio-visual devices, have become a central component in many educational settings (Yugsán-Gómez et al., 2019; Kay, 2012). These tools are anticipated to be integrated into nearly every aspect of educational institutions soon. Podcasts offer an effective educational tool for ESL teaching, significantly enhancing English language proficiency and academic performance. Higher education institutions (HEIs) should prioritize creating active learning experiences that enhances student engagement and improve academic outcomes. This study focuses on teaching academic writing skills, emphasising the importance of understanding the challenges students face.

Academic writing, as discussed by Frye (2022), Khalo (2022), Mitchell (2021), Poe (2022), and Teng (2022), is a specialised form of written communication employed in universities and colleges. It serves as a vehicle for presenting arguments, theories, and findings. What distinguishes academic writing from other types of writing genres is its adherence to a formal language style, a coherent structure, and a strong emphasis on supporting statements with robust evidence and analytical reasoning. Academic writing conforms to established conventions, including the inclusion of citations and references, ensuring precision, and upholding scholarly integrity. First-year ESL students in Academic Writing modules encounter a multitude of challenges (AlMarwani, 2020; Hawari, 2022; Hirano, 2014; Kilfoil, 2021; Lea & Street, 2006; Maphoto, 2022; Mendoza, 2022; Nenotek, 2022; Pineteh, 2014; Wang & Xie, 2022). These challenges encompass various aspects, including grasping organisational conventions like creating a clear thesis statement, introduction, signposting, argumentation, counter-argumentation, applying subject content, linguistic proficiency, citation and referencing, paragraphing, and adhering to grammatical conventions. Moreover, students often struggle with producing logical conclusions and recommendations within their academic papers. The difficulty is further compounded when students must engage with academic writing in English [as a medium of instruction] at higher education institutions [HEIs] (Ali, 2022; Cilliers, 2022; Luvuno, 2022; Moeiniasl, 2022). This linguistic shift presents an additional layer of complexity for ESL students, as they grapple not only with the academic writing process itself but also with the challenges of writing in a non-native language. In essence, these studies collectively emphasise the multifaceted nature of the difficulties faced by first-year ESL students in Academic Writing modules, emphasising the need for targeted support and instruction to help students navigate these challenges successfully. Historically, the issue of academic writing among first-year university students in South Africa has been a matter of significant concern, encompassing multiple challenges that hinder their progress (Barton, 1994; Bharuthram, 2012, 2007; Boughey & McKenna, 2016; Gee, 2000; Lee, 2020; Leibowitz, 2004; Lentz, 2020; Street, 1984, 1995). It is crucial to emphasise that the mastery of academic writing skills assumes a pivotal role in achieving academic excellence within the open distance e-learning institution [ODEL] institution (Al-Handhali, Al-Rasbi & Sherimon, 2020; Anderson & Rivera-Vargas, 2020; Hobbs, 2020; Sancho-Gil, Rivera-Vargas & Miño-Puigcercós, 2020).

With that said, it is essential to stress the profound importance of student support initiatives. Student support, according to prior scholars such as Butt and Rehman (2010), Lapina et al. (2016), McLeay et al. (2017), and Paul and Pradhan (2019), constitutes a pivotal element within HEIs. It entails the provision of high-quality services to students from diverse educational backgrounds. In the current educational sphere, the absence of effective student support initiatives can impede students from realising their academic goals. Wong and Chapman (2023), Kakada et al. (2019), and Arco-Tirado et al. (2019) accentuate the significance of enhancing and optimising student support programs and initiatives. These scholars particularly emphasise the need for heightened interaction between students and lecturers as a critical component in the successful implementation of these support programs. Furthermore, Lumadi (2021), Bantjes et al. (2020), Harkavy et al. (2020), Van Staden and Naidoo (2022) firmly assert that student support within educational institutions holds paramount importance. They concur that it plays a pivotal role in enabling students to attain their learning objectives, augment their knowledge, and ultimately successfully complete their studies. Additionally, Makoe and Nsamba (2019) shed light on how the absence of adequate student support can lead to elevated dropout rates in ODeL institutions. The lack of student support contributes significantly to high failure and dropout rates, as students often feel neglected, isolated, and overwhelmed by the demands of academic writing (Guo et al., 2022; Rotar, 2022; Teng et al., 2022).

Podcasts and vodcasts were chosen as effective supplementary tools for this study due to their ability to cater to diverse learning styles and their potential to support students' academic development. Szymkowiak et al. (2021) highlight that traditional teaching methods are becoming less relevant for today's tech-savvy students, who increasingly seek to integrate advanced technologies into their learning experiences. Both podcasts and vodcasts have demonstrated success in improving various academic skills, including vocabulary enhancement, active learning, communication, and academic writing. For instance, Bueno-Alastuey and Nemeth (2022) and Jovanović-Nikolić & Stojković-Trajković (2022) observed their positive impact on vocabulary and active learning, while Sheerah and Yadav (2022) noted their contribution to communication skills. Despite these benefits, these tools are rarely used together in social research. Lee (2020) further asserts the value of podcasts and vodcasts in e-learning, particularly for teaching academic writing, emphasising their advantages in terms of accessibility, flexibility, and motivation. These tools also encourage independence and active participation, establishing an engaging and effective learning environment. Furthermore, the integration of digital technology appeals to auditory and visual learning styles, combats feelings of isolation, and enhances satisfaction with e-learning through collaboration between lecturers and students. This technology enables seamless information sharing and knowledge exchange among students. Strielkowski et al. (2020) and Queiruga-Dios (2020) argue that current educational practices tend to force students into conforming to lecturers' teaching styles, disregarding their individual engagement, interpretation, and knowledge acquisition processes. This often results in neglecting and not accommodating the diverse learning styles of students. López-Iñesta (2020), Strielkowski et al. (2020), and Queiruga-Dios (2020) highlight how students are frequently required to adapt to lecturers' methods that may not align with their own learning preferences and effective ways of interacting with, interpreting, and acquiring knowledge. As a result, students' unique learning styles are often overlooked and inadequately addressed. The primary goal of this study was to determine the quality of podcasts and vodcasts received by first-year students. López-Iñesta (2020) and Queiruga-Dios (2020) stress the emergence of the 21st century knowledge society, which utilises a variety of technological teaching tools. However, Strielkowski et al. (2020) argue that while the digitisation of HEIs offers benefits, some students may be hesitant about technology [technophobes] and not fully prepared for online education. Furthermore, Jovanović's research (2021) reveals that first-year students have limited familiarity with vodcasting and may not fully appreciate its potential for language learning, whereas they are more acquainted with

podcasts as supplemental tools. Importantly, there is minimal exposure to vodcasts in teaching and learning (Jovanović, 2021). Contrary to Jovanović's (2021) claims, recent research within the context of ODeL highlights the benefits of podcasts and vodcasts for students in ODeL universities. Studies by Faramarzi et al. (2020), Javier (2021), Lee (2020), Producers, Travis, and Pownall (2023), and Sevnarayan and Mohale (2022) support the advantageous nature of these multimedia tools in ODeL settings. Moreover, a recent study conducted by Moosa and Bekker (2022) revealed that some participants found recorded video lessons to be advantageous for reviewing content and organising resources, ultimately facilitating effective teaching and learning. Some participants in Moosa and Bekker's study (2022) revealed the following:

What made learning easy for me was the ability to repeat content that I did not understand in a recorded video lesson and take notes as much as possible. Additionally, the organisation of resources in subjects makes it necessary to go back and revise accordingly (Moosa & Bekker, 2022:7).

... they [lecturers] prepared us lecture recordings that made me feel closer, even though there was a physical distance between us (Moosa & Bekker, 2022:7).

The above findings reveal that students experience difficulties in understanding the module content, which is further compounded by the large volume of online content. However, the presence of online resources proves beneficial (Moosa & Bekker, 2022). Integrating e-learning tools [podcasts and vodcasts] in HEIs customises opportunities for learning styles in teaching academic writing and increases interest and focus (Jianu & Vasilateanu, 2017; Sanchez et al., 2020). However, some lecturers may not be equipped to create meaningful podcasts and vodcasts that can add value to teaching and learning, and lecturers may need constant workshops and training to adapt to the demands and ever-changing content delivery technologies (Fhloinn & Fitzmaurice, 2021; Hall & Jones, 2021; Mahyoob, 2020; Mishra et al., 2020; Simanjuntak & Panjaitan, 2021; Shiang et al., 2021). Thus, the significance of this study lies in the guideline's creation of podcasts and vodcasts and the implementation of supplemental tools to enhance the academic writing skills of first-year students enrolled in an Academic Writing module. Numerous scholars argue that integrating podcasts and vodcasts as pedagogical tools can help alleviate feelings of disconnection and isolation experienced by students in HEIs, as highlighted by Mhlanga and Molio (2020), Mthimunye and Daniels (2019), and Wentzel and De Hart (2020). The simultaneous use of podcasts and vodcasts offers several advantages. Firstly, it recognises and caters to diverse learning style preferences and individual academic writing skill needs (Chien et al., 2020; Harris et al., 2020). Additionally, podcasts and vodcasts have proven effective in enhancing students' vocabulary, active learning, communication, and academic writing skills (Bueno-Alastuey & Nemeth, 2022; Jovanović-Nikolić & Stojković-Trajković, 2022; Sheerah & Yadav, 2022).

A matter of concern as indicated by Bordes et al.'s (2020), McLean et al. (2016) and Tang (2018) studies revealed that lecturers viewed the creation of video [vodcasts] as a daunting [overwhelming] task and were apprehensive to use vodcasts. In addition, lecturers revealed that through the introduction and training of user-friendly technology, recording vodcasts is relatively straightforward when provided with access to the appropriate tools and training. Still, Aljawarneh (2020), Lara et al. (2020), and Lizcano et al. (2020) maintain that the provision of multimedia files such as podcasts and vodcasts is still a major challenge for HEIs in developing countries in terms of weak content development, poor internet connectivity, and insufficient knowledge regarding the creation of multimedia files. Thus, it is essential to support lecturers in creating high-quality podcasts and vodcasts guidelines to enhance academic enrichment and engagement. These guidelines aim to inform current and future lecturers about the intricacies of producing high-quality supplementary tools with practical skills, which essentially benefit EAW101 first-year students. By implementing these tools, academic writing skills can be enhanced, transactional distance can be reduced, different learning styles [audio and audio-visual] can be catered to, and education can be made more engaging for tech-savvy first-year students. This aligns with existing literature that emphasises the importance of using

supplemental tools to teach academic writing to first-year students of diverse educational backgrounds (Aagaard & Lund, 2020; Bergdahl et al., 2020; Brevik et al., 2019; Dalgarno, 2014; Faramarzi et al., 2020; Hassan et al., 2021; Hollister et al., 2022; Ifedayo et al., 2021; Langer, 2021; Lee et al., 2021; Johnston et al., 2021; Ma, 2021; Meletiou-Mavrotheris, Mavrou & Rebelo, 2021; Noetel et al., 2021; Pan, 2020; Raes et al., 2020; Rapanta et al., 2020; Sanchez et al., 2020; Simanjuntak & Panjaitan, 2021; Schöbel et al., 2021; Tobin & Guadagno, 2022).

Casares (2022), O'Connor et al. (2020), and Vergara (2022) denote that it is imperative to emphasise the importance of creating high-quality podcasts and vodcasts that encourage interaction between students and lecturers. Such multimedia content can offer substantial benefits to EAW101 students in terms of accessibility, education, and engagement. Nevertheless, a significant challenge lies in the time and resources required for producing high-quality podcasts and vodcasts, which can serve as a barrier for some lecturers (Admiraal, 2022; Dave et al., 2022; Dhiman, 2023; Vachkova, 2022). Thus, guidelines for creating high-quality podcasts and vodcasts are essential for HEIs. High-quality podcasts and vodcasts have the potential to alleviate feelings of isolation and establish a strong foundation for disseminating course content. Additionally, high-quality podcasts and vodcasts maximise the value of educational materials through repurposing, as highlighted by Doi, Lucky, and Rubin (2022), Kenna (2022), and Producers, Travis, and Pownall (2023). In line with the perspective of Faramarzi et al. (2020), podcasting and vodcasting emerge as innovative tools in distance education, providing remote students with engaging and enlightening content that effectively bridges the gap between students and lecturers. Integrating podcasts and vodcasts into academic writing modules can enhance ESL students' learning experiences, reduce transactional distance, and cater to varied learning preferences, ultimately leading to improved academic performance and reduced dropout rates in ODeL institutions.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study combined Moore's (1997) Transactional Distance Theory [TDT] and Cleveland-Innes, Stenbom, and Garrison (2024), and Garrison, Anderson, and Archer's (2000) Community of Inquiry framework [CoI] to improve distance learning. These frameworks aim to enhance content delivery using multimedia, reduce student isolation, and promote interactive learning. They are applied to research in the context of distance education at UniX, focusing on cognitive, social, and teaching aspects. By integrating these frameworks with action research, the study explored how students perceive the quality of podcasts and vodcasts they receive. This comprehensive approach enhanced the understanding of distance education, leading to improvements in teaching and learning, particularly in modules like EAW101.

4. METHOD

4.1. RESEARCH CONTEXT

This study explores the quality of podcasts and vodcasts provided to first-year students enrolled in the EAW101 module at UniX, an ODeL institution. Academic writing is a critical skill for university students, and by focusing on the specific needs of first-year students in this module, the study aims to significantly improve their writing capabilities, which are foundational for their success in higher education. Evaluating the quality, effectiveness, and appropriateness of these multimedia resources ensures that they meet educational standards and effectively contribute to the learning experience. The development of guidelines based on the research findings will provide valuable insights for lecturers, helping them create better multimedia content and leading to more engaging and effective teaching methods. The findings from this study are not only beneficial for UniX but also for other ODeL institutions. By sharing best practices and recommendations, the study can help improve the overall quality of education in

online and distance learning environments. First-year students often face unique challenges as they transition to university life. Providing high-quality educational resources tailored to their needs can improve retention rates and academic performance, making the study's context crucial for institutional success. Moreover, the recommendations and guidelines derived from this research have the potential to influence educational practices beyond UniX, creating a culture of continuous improvement in multimedia resource development across various institutions.

4.2 RESEARCH APPROACH AND DESIGN

According to Evered and Roger (2022) and Lufungulo et al. (2021), action research involves a systematic process of identifying problems, taking purposeful actions, collecting data, testing strategies, assessing outcomes, and reflecting on these actions to inform future steps. It aims to transform the educational reform paradigm by prioritizing inquiry and placing lecturers at the forefront of practical research efforts. Action research can be conducted individually or collaboratively, with the goal of enhancing teaching, improving student performance, and empowering lecturers (Mills, 2017). This approach emphasises continuous inquiry and reflection to address practical challenges, treating lecturers as scholars actively engaged in improving educational practices. Unlike traditional reforms that restrict teacher autonomy, action research promotes educator-driven innovation (McNiff, 2016). In this study, the researcher uses action research to explore students' perceptions of the quality of podcasts and vodcasts in teaching academic writing skills at a distance HEI. In adopting this approach, the researcher seeks to improve academic writing, refine teaching methods, and enhance the implementation of high-quality multimedia tools. This iterative process ensures that students' feedback is integral to developing effective resources, addressing both the practical and pedagogical challenges of teaching academic writing in a distance education context.

4.3 SAMPLE

In action research, the term "sample" carries specific meanings. Brink (1996) and Kenton (2019) maintain that a sample refers to a purposefully selected subset of a whole group. In qualitative research, even a relatively small sample size can effectively represent the broader group by capturing meaningful insights. For this study, 10 EAW101 students enrolled in the first semester of 2022 were purposively selected as key informants to explore academic writing challenges within UniX's ODeL context. Of these, five students responded to online evaluation questions (OEQ) via the LMS Moodle platform, while the other five participated in focus group discussions (FGD) conducted through Microsoft Teams. Although the response rate was limited, qualitative research emphasizes the depth and richness of data over quantity (Dworkin, 2012). While Bernard (2000) suggests around 36 participants for ethnographic studies, Bertaux (1981) posits that a minimum of 15 can suffice for qualitative research. This study's focus on a smaller participant group aligns with the goal of capturing detailed, experiential insights. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants, safeguarding their anonymity throughout the study.

4.4 RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

The study builds upon research by Afolayan and Oniyinde (2019), Billy (2021), and McLeod (2018), which affirm the effectiveness of OEQ as a qualitative research instrument. OEQs are specifically designed to gather detailed and descriptive responses directly from participants. They prompt individuals to articulate their thoughts in their own words, thus providing rich insights into participants' perspectives, experiences, attitudes, and behaviors. This method is adaptable across various communication modes such as face-to-face, telephone, or email interactions, making it particularly suitable for eliciting detailed and descriptive participant

responses (Sevnarayan, 2022). In this study, OEQ was selected to encourage participants to freely share their individual experiences without constraints, thereby aligning with the research objectives and facilitating comprehensive information collection. Conversely, Stewart (2018) and Tümen-Akyıldız and Ahmed (2021) define FGD as a method to uncover hidden participant experiences within a small group context, facilitated by a skilled researcher. However, a challenge arises when introverted participants hesitate to express their thoughts. To mitigate this, the researcher proactively identified introverted participants and actively engaged them, creating an inclusive and supportive environment during FGD sessions. Qualitative research instruments utilised in this study included OEQ conducted through the LMS Moodle platform to address the first research question, and FGD conducted via a Microsoft Teams meeting to provide insights for the second research question, aiming to explore students' in-depth experiences. The research ethics number for this study is Ref #: 2021_RPSC_050.

4.5 DATA ANALYSIS

The researchers employed Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase approach for thematic analysis [TA] to rigorously analyse data from OEQ and FGD. This methodological framework facilitated the systematic identification, organization, and interpretation of meaningful themes within the dataset, aligning with systematic approaches advocated by scholars like Brink and Van der Walt (2006) and Burns and Grove (2009). Concurrently, the researcher integrated TDT by Moore (1973) and the CoI framework by Garrison et al. (2000) into their analysis. TDT informed the exploration of psychological and communication gaps between students and lecturers in online learning environments, while CoI guided the examination of social, cognitive, and teaching presences in nurturing meaningful online interactions. By synthesizing TA with TDT and CoI, the researcher provided a comprehensive understanding of how these theoretical perspectives manifest in the complexities of online learning experiences, thereby enriching both empirical insights and theoretical advancements in distance education research. The study's reliability is enhanced through the triangulation of TA, TDT, and CoI. This integration ensures that data are thoroughly themed, analysed, and discussed, presenting a robust framework for comprehensive exploration and interpretation of findings in the context of online learning environments.

4.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Permission to collect data was granted by the Research Ethics Committee at the university, with clearance number Ref: 90268091_CRECHS_2022. To protect participants and institutional identities, pseudonyms were used for the university, module, lecturers, and students. The researchers adhered to ethical guidelines, obtaining informed consent, ensuring transparency, and securing data access by creating password-protected file on the computer on which they stored data.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section represents findings organised into themes from research questions. The following themes emerged:

- i. Multiple quality challenges with podcasts.
- ii. Numerous quality challenges with vodcasts.
- iii. Creation of guidelines to enhance the quality of podcasts and vodcasts.

5.1 MULTIPLE QUALITY CHALLENGES WITH PODCASTS

In the effort to enhance academic writing support, podcasts were integrated into the existing supplementary tools [toolkit of resources], which includes prescribed textbooks, feedforward tutorial letters, and virtual classes. Positioned within a comprehensive student support framework, these podcasts aimed to enrich learning experiences. The researcher deployed an OEQ via the LMS Moodle platform to evaluate their impact. Despite the outreach, participation was limited to half of the targeted students, totaling five respondents. The OEQ sought to capture first-hand perspectives on the quality and utility of the podcasts provided. Presented below are the unedited, verbatim comments collected:

I thought podcasts were cool, but, like, there were times when I couldn't catch what the lecturer was saying, no matter how many times I hit the replay button. Their voice kept going all over the place, and when it was low, I swear I heard nada. At first, I blamed my phone, but then I gave it a shot on my laptop, and bam, same problem. Turns out, it wasn't my gadgets' fault, it was the recording itself (Student 1).

I'm totally appreciative of podcasts, but, in some of them, the presenter just zoomed [talking too fast] through things way too quickly. I felt like I missed out on loads of important stuff. So, to sort things out, I reached out to my lecturers, and they were super helpful (Student 2).

Honestly, I had a real tough time with the podcasts. The lecturers threw around all these fancy words and high-level English that made me scratch my head. When they tried to teach academic writing using these multimedia thingies, they dropped words like "suffice", "amalgamation", "mitigation," and a bunch more that practically had me glued to my dictionary. I kinda wish they could make things more straightforward, especially because English isn't my first language. I mean, I get it, we're in an English-speaking environment, but it can be a real challenge for us non-native speakers sometimes (Student 3).

Alright, so here's the thing: I am into podcasts because I'm more of an audio-learner, you know? Podcasts are super-duper long, but it felt like I was stuck in a never-ending book that I had to go back and reread, like, a million times to get it. I'd totally be down for shorter podcasts because some things are just easier when you keep it short and sweet, you feel me? But hey, even with the long stuff, I'd still pick podcasts any day over the boring prescribed text (Student 4).

So, like, I gotta say, podcasts are helpful and fun. But sometimes, the lecturers, they go all around the bushes when they explain academic writing stuff, and I'm just there like, "Wait, what are we talking about?" I mean, I know it might sound like I'm slow, but honestly, I'd love it if they could just, you know, give it to us straight and simple. Like, no fancy detours. So, for real, in the future, I hope my lecturers can keep it straightforward (Student 5).

Through students' verbatim accounts in the OEQ, a vivid picture emerges of their experiences with podcast quality. Students appreciate podcasts as supplementary aids but encounter several notable challenges. They highlight difficulties with audibility, noting issues with lecturers' speech clarity and pace, as well as the use of complex language. Moreover, overly lengthy podcasts hinder their comprehension, with a preference voiced for more concise and straightforward content delivery (Student 1, Student 2, Student 3, Student 4, Student 5, OEQ).

These challenges significantly impact podcast quality and, consequently, the intended enhancement of first-year students' academic writing skills through multimedia tools. This finding indicates the critical need to ensure high-quality podcast production that effectively supports academic learning goals. Lumadi (2021), Bantjes et al. (2020), Harkavy et al. (2020), and Van Staden and Naidoo (2022) discuss the pivotal role of effective student support in achieving academic success, echoing the importance of addressing these challenges. Recent research by Guo et al. (2022), Rotar (2022), and Teng et al. (2022) further highlights the consequences of inadequate student support, contributing to increased failure and dropout rates. Despite efforts by EAW101 lecturers to utilise podcasts for academic writing improvement, the lack of necessary production skills has resulted in subpar supplementary materials. This aligns with findings by Fhloinn and Fitzmaurice (2021), Hall and Jones (2021), Mahyoob (2020), Mishra et al. (2020), Shiang et al. (2021), and Simanjuntak and Panjaitan (2021), suggesting that lectures may require additional guidance and training to effectively utilise multimedia tools in teaching. Therefore, this study advocates for the development of comprehensive guidelines for producing high-quality podcasts. The absence of such resources

not only diminishes the effectiveness of educational interventions but also increases transactional distance (Moore, 1972). Wong and Chapman (2023), Kakada et al. (2019), and Arco-Tirado et al. (2019) argue for enhancing student support initiatives to optimise academic writing skills without creating additional barriers. This thematic narrative highlights the urgent need for targeted improvements in podcast production to better support student learning outcomes and mitigate academic challenges effectively.

5.2 NUMEROUS QUALITY CHALLENGES WITH VODCASTS

First-year students often find academic writing challenging. To reduce the academic challenges and help students perform better, EAW101 lecturers incorporated vodcasts as a supplemental tool to address writing challenges. To discern the effectiveness of this instructional intervention and gain a comprehensive insight into students' experiences, a FGD was employed through the Microsoft Teams meeting. Out of the ten students solicited for participation in the FGD, five willingly contributed their unedited, verbatim comments, which are presented below:

I was kind of freaked out when the lecturer dumped all the citation and referencing stuff on us in one go. I mean, no one ever taught me how to do that properly before coming to university. It would be great if the lecturer realised that we need to take it one step at a time. I had to buy the textbook and beg my sister to help me figure out this whole citation and referencing deal. There's so much to unpack like punctuation, italics, what the heck "et al." even means, journal volumes, and a bunch more. Honestly, who can be a pro at this from the get-go? (Student 1A)

I've noticed that some of the stuff in our textbook can be pretty tough to grasp. It would be awesome if the subject material in things like vodcasts could be made simpler. That way, listening to and watching them wouldn't be as tricky as reading the textbook. I get it; university is supposed to be challenging, but just picture everything being super tough. (Student 2A).

It would be incredibly helpful if lecturers could include transcriptions in the vodcasts. I met a deaf student on Telegram who is registered for the EAW101 module and it got me thinking about how challenging it must be for my friend to access course content without transcripts. Having transcriptions available would not only benefit students with hearing impairments but also students like me who might occasionally miss something during the lecture. Sometimes, the lecturer speaks too fast. Being able to read the subtitles or transcriptions would make it much easier to understand and review the material (Student 3A).

It's wonderful when lecturers take the time to visually demonstrate these skills. As a visual learner myself, I can attest to how beneficial it is to see the process in action. But I could benefit more if the lecturers did not concentrate on referencing books, articles, unpublished articles, dictionaries, newspaper in different vodcast series as opposed to just loaded vodcasts. (Student 4A).

I truly enjoy vodcasts over podcasts because I see what is being talked about. Vodcasts are like face-to-face learning. So, I enjoy face-to-face learning, as it is the type of learning that I have been accustomed to since high school. The visual element makes a huge difference in my understanding. Before, I used to struggle alone and feel isolated. But with the usage of vodcasts, I have learned a whole lot. (Student 5A)

The verbatim statements above shed light on the students' experiences regarding the quality of the vodcasts they received. Vodcasts offer an immersive visual experience that resonates with students' high school backgrounds [face-to-face experiences]. However, students revealed that despite finding vodcasts helpful, they encountered challenges related to their quality. Some vodcasts contained an overwhelming amount of information, leading to information overload. Additionally, issues such as complex module content, the absence of transcriptions, and information congestion contributed to the overall poor quality of the vodcasts (Student 1A, Student 2A, Student 3A, Student 4A, Student 5A, FGD). While vodcasts aim to provide students with a visual simulation of their learning materials, these multifaceted challenges hinder the smooth learning process. Consequently, students are compelled to continuously seek alternative sources of information to complement the vodcasts.

Based on the findings presented above, it is crucial for vodcasts to serve as a helpful tool for students in their academic writing activities. However, the presence of various quality issues

has made this challenging. Poor-quality vodcasts prevent students from fully benefiting. Several studies (Doi, Lucky, & Rubin, 2022; Kenna, 2022; Prodgers, Travis, & Pownall, 2023) emphasise that high-quality vodcasts can significantly enhance educational materials by repurposing them. This aligns with the perspective of Faramarzi et al. (2020), who see vodcasting as an innovative tool in distance education. It provides remote students with engaging content that bridges the gap between students and lecturers. However, students have expressed difficulties in comprehending the module content, suggesting that simplifying the material and clarifying citations and references would be helpful. Therefore, it is essential to establish guidelines for creating high-quality podcasts and vodcasts for EAW101 students in ODeL. This has the potential to reduce feelings of isolation among students. A study by Moosa and Bekker (2022) found that recorded video lessons (vodcasts) were advantageous for reviewing content and organising resources, which facilitated effective teaching and learning. The success was attributed to how lecturers prepared the lecture recordings, making students feel connected despite the physical distance. Lecturers may face challenges in creating high-quality vodcasts due to a lack of training, as discussed by Bordes et al. (2020), McLean et al. (2016), and Tang (2018). Many lecturers find the task daunting and are hesitant to use vodcasts. However, with the introduction of user-friendly technology and proper training (Aljawarneh, 2020; Lara et al., 2020; Lizcano et al., 2020), recording vodcasts becomes relatively straightforward. Therefore, it is imperative to provide current and future lecturers with guidelines for creating high-quality vodcasts to effectively deliver module content.

5.3 CREATION OF GUIDELINES TO ENHANCE THE QUALITY OF PODCASTS AND VODCASTS.

In harnessing the potential use of multimedia digital tools aimed at enhancing the academic writing skills of first-year students, it became imperative to discern the experiences of students regarding the implementation of podcasts and vodcasts. The unaltered students' verbatim comments from the OEQ and FGD were used to create the guidelines to increase the high-quality of the creation of podcasts and vodcasts. The outcomes of this exploration revealed a spectrum of responses that are unique. The findings were then themed. The findings served as a foundation for the development of comprehensive guidelines tailored specifically to creating high-quality podcasts and vodcasts within the ODeL context. Students enjoyed the implementation of podcasts and vodcasts in their teaching and learning. In addition, they provided essential insights that, when incorporated, could improve the quality of the creation of podcasts and vodcasts. Importantly, these guidelines stand to substantially benefit EAW101 first-year students and lecturers. The incorporation of podcasts and vodcasts holds the potential to elevate academic writing skills, diminish transactional distance, and encourage an engaging educational experience for the digitally adept cohort of first-year students. Table 1.1 represents concise guidelines and processes for the creation of high-quality podcasts and vodcasts.

Table 1.1: Summary of guidelines for the creation of podcasts and vodcasts in an ODeL context (Mohale 2023, p. 218).

GUIDELINE'S DESCRIPTIVE THEMES	Checklist: Yes/No?
1. <u>Speak in a calm, slow, audible, and neutral tone of voice.</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Did you use a calm tone of voice to captivate students' attention? ▪ Is your voice clear and audible? ▪ Did you speak at a pace that allows students to understand the topic? ▪ Did you incorporate appropriate pauses in your presentation? ▪ Have you reviewed your podcasts and vodcasts to assess your vocal projections? ▪ Did you incorporate background musical instrumentals to captivate students' attention and interests? (optional) 	

2. To simplify the module's content-use plain (simple) English.

- Did you use plain language to explain complex vocabulary and concepts?
- Did you explain the glossary of terms using simple language?
- Did you explore all possible methods to simplify the module's content?
- Did you identify the key complex concepts?
- Did you unpack [breakdown] complex concepts into smaller components?
- Did you provide a thorough explanation and clarification of the key concepts?
- Did you offer a step-by-step guide on how to complete tasks?
- Did you provide realistic examples?
- Did you eliminate lengthy sentences?
- Did you use relatable visual aids?

3. Create podcasts and vodcasts that are a minimum of five to a maximum of minutes.

- Did you ensure that your podcasts and vodcasts adhere to the set time frames?
- Did you effectively plan and organise the content of your presentation?
- Did you prioritise the main points of your discussion?
- Did you practice and time your presentation?
- Did you review and edit your final product?

4. When discussing topics, be explicit (straightforward) and avoid implicit connotations.

- Did you state the objective(s) of your presentation clearly and explicitly?
- Did you discuss the concepts to convey information without ambiguity?
- Are there any assumptions, and/or inferences?
- Did you use relevant infographics?
- Did you repeat the key points to ensure clarity?
- Did you use simplified English to cater for language awareness to EAL and ESL students?

5. Create podcasts and vodcasts that specifically focus and discuss on topics outlined within the assignment (s).

- Did you focus on and discuss topics that were outlined and relevant in the assignment(s)?
 - Did you highlight your main ideas outlined?
 - Did you unpack [breakdown and explain] the meaning embedded in instructions and provide guidance on how to determine the correctness of responses?
 - Are there any instances of redundancy or irrelevant information?
 - If yes, did you edit your podcasts and vodcasts?
 - Did you discuss core academic writing features such as the purpose of academic writing, organising academic writing, stance, voice, signposting, academic language vs biased [emotive] language, paragraph structure, topic sentences, supporting sentences, and concluding sentences, citing sources, developing credible arguments,
-

paraphrasing, summarising, avoiding plagiarism, editing, and proofreading?

6. Treat each topic as a distinct subject, mimic face-to-face interactional cues and include transcriptions.

- Did you identify which topics are challenging and why?
 - Did you gather pertinent information on the selected topic?
 - Did you concentrate on one topic at a time?
 - Did you present the topic in a coherent and well-organised manner?
 - Did you include transcriptions?
 - For episodic podcasts and vodcasts, did you explain what each episode would cover within the first 20 seconds?
 - At the end of each podcast and vodcast, did you indicate the topic that will be discussed in the next episode?
 - Did you systematically number each episode, for instance, ‘1 of 5’ or ‘3 of 5’?
 - Did you use face-to-face interactional cues?
-

These comprehensive guidelines help lecturers create effective podcasts and vodcasts to improve academic writing skills for first-year students in ODeL institutions. They include using a clear, friendly, and neutral tone of voice, simplifying the subject matter, using plain language, keeping content concise, providing straightforward explanations, focusing on specific topics, and including transcriptions. Following these guidelines ensures high-quality podcasts and vodcasts for effective teaching.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explored students’ perspectives on the quality of the podcasts and vodcasts they accessed, leading in the development of six specific guidelines aimed at enhancing these multimedia tools. Students appreciated the integration of podcasts and vodcasts as supplemental tools for addressing academic writing challenges within the EAW101 module at a distance HEI. The guidelines provide lecturers with practical strategies to optimise student learning experiences, fortifying the educational foundation necessary to enhance the academic writing skills of first-year students. These multimedia tools effectively bridged the gap between virtual and traditional learning environments, creating an engaging and intellectually stimulating educational experience. The findings indicate the critical role of high-quality multimedia resources in online education. The study recommend that lecturers not only adopt the guidelines but also seek continuous feedback from students and engage in institutional training to improve multimedia quality. Future research should investigate into specific aspects of multimedia quality, such as audiovisual clarity, interactivity, and accessibility, to better understand their long-term impact on learning outcomes. Additionally, comparative studies are needed to identify best practices across different academic modules. Finally, exploring how emerging technologies such as AI driven personalisation or interactive platforms can enhance student engagement and academic writing development will provide further insights into the evolving contexts of distant HEI.

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