




Exploring the Impact of E-Learning Strategies on Enhancing Workplace English Competence at an Open Distance E-Learning (ODEL) University in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the implementation of e-learning strategies to enhance workplace English competence. The focus is on a semester module that consists of approximately 10,000 first-year university students in an ODeL context in South Africa. The study's objective was to collect data and contribute to the field of language learning in the workplace. Guided by the TPACK theory, the investigation employed qualitative research methods, incorporating open-ended evaluation questions and an observation schedule. The instruments allowed for a deep exploration of students' perspectives and experiences with e-learning strategies, specifically their impact on workplace English competence. The results of the study highlighted the positive effects of e-learning strategies on enhancing workplace English competence. Participants reported improved language skills, increased confidence in communication, and an enhanced ability to meet workplace language requirements. In addition, the findings revealed the significance of interactive multimedia materials, collaborative learning activities, and personalised feedback as effective pedagogical approaches in the module. The contributions of this study lie in its exploration and validation of e-learning strategies for the enhancement of workplace English competence at a distance learning university.

KEYWORDS

E-learning strategies; English competence; first-year students; TPACK theory; workplace English.

The evolution of the 5th generation mobile network (5G), the internet of things (IoT), and artificial intelligence (AI) initiated an era of data-driven product design, revolutionising various industries and significantly impacting the context of education. This transformative wave generated innovative technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and cutting-edge e-learning tools (Laghari et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2022). The integration of these technologies has significantly impacted educational approaches, particularly in the context of workplace English teaching. Higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide have responded to this technological revolution by incorporating VR and mobile assisted language learning (MALL) techniques into their workplace English programs (Rafiq et al., 2021). However, amidst these advancements, a notable research gap remains, specifically that of exploring the synergy of e-learning strategies and IoT in enhancing workplace English skills. This knowledge void is particularly pronounced within an open distance and e-learning (ODEL) university (Baloyi, 2021; Buthelezi & Van Wyk, 2020), where the implications for workplace English competence are substantial. To bridge this gap, the present study embarks on an investigation of e-learning strategies for workplace English (Mod15) in the context of a South African ODeL university.

Students who enroll in Mod15 form a diverse group, with ages ranging between 18 and 70. This inclusive cohort includes students of various genders, reflecting a broad spectrum of backgrounds and experiences. Many have English as their second language (ESL) or speak English as an additional language (EAL) and are managing their work commitments alongside their studies, united by a common goal to enhance their professional communication skills (Proctor et al., 2016). Among these students, many face diverse difficulties, including writing and comprehension; these are issues commonly experienced by ESL and EAL students in South Africa (Maphoto, 2021). One of the researchers was encouraged to conduct this study after learning of the recurring challenges that emerged during virtual classes conducted with these students as part of their preparation for assessments.

The study uses qualitative research methods and adopts the technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge (TPACK) theory (Mishra & Koehler, 2006). This research aspires to provide insights for lecturers tasked with developing language programs for distance education (DE) students. Furthermore, the research aims to advance both workplace language competence and instructional design knowledge. The urgency of this research became more apparent considering the dearth of studies that examine e-learning strategies for workplace English within a South African ODeL context. The implications of this research extend beyond academia and into the professional field, potentially enhancing language programs and thereby benefiting students' professional development and employability (Aderibigbe et al., 2023).

The study's primary focus is on an English module, referred to as Mod15 for anonymity, administered at an ODeL university designed to target first-year students who possess diverse language backgrounds with the aim of elevating their workplace English competence. Mod15 assumes significance because of the concerning high failure rates observed, despite its enrolment of between 10,000 and 20,000 students each semester. Mod15 imparts crucial

workplace English skills that comprise specialised vocabulary, grammar, and effective communication strategies adapted for the professional context. These skills are imparted through multifaceted e-learning strategies, including live-streamed classes, online discussion forums, and online feedback letters, all meticulously designed to facilitate this online learning module. In the context of this study, e-learning strategies refer to a set of planned and systematic approaches applied in developing, delivering, and facilitating electronic or online learning experiences (Garcia et al., 2018). These strategies are designed to enhance the effectiveness of online education and improve learning outcomes for students (Garcia et al., 2018).

Research Context

The context of this study is set within a South African ODeL university, which the researchers refer to as UOD for anonymity. This university is one of Africa's largest ODeL universities, registering approximately 500,000 students annually (Letseka et al., 2018). This vast and diverse student body represents a broad spectrum of financial, linguistic, and social backgrounds within the African context. This means that the university's student population is notably diverse, comprising individuals who juggle part-time academic pursuits alongside full-time employment. It involves a wide age range, spanning between 18 and 70, and reflects a diverse array of ethnic backgrounds (Maphoto, 2021). A significant portion of these students, especially those residing in remote areas, are confronted with challenges related to internet connectivity. Many rely on mobile phones or local internet cafes to access online resources and to complete assessments for their modules (Ngubane-Mokiwa & Letseka, 2015). Furthermore, language barriers pose additional complexities, particularly for South African ESL students (Letseka et al., 2018; Maphoto, 2021). These students often face hurdles in mastering workplace English, which is crucial for their professional development in a diverse workforce. The importance of this contextual information lies in its direct relevance to the purpose of this study, which is to investigate the impact of e-learning strategies on enhancing workplace English competence. Understanding the unique challenges faced by UOD students, such as connectivity issues and language barriers, is pivotal for designing effective e-learning strategies adapted to this specific student population. In addition, the experiences and insights gained from this study in the South African ODeL context may have broader implications for similar universities worldwide, where diverse student bodies and digital connectivity challenges are also prevalent.

TOWARDS ENHANCING WORKPLACE ENGLISH COMPETENCE

Perceptions of Students on the Effectiveness of e-Learning Strategies for English in the Workplace

The surge in e-learning strategies, propelled by the COVID-19 pandemic, prompts a vital discussion on their efficacy among workplace students. In this era of modern education, marked by flexibility, e-learning is indispensable (Regmi & Jones, 2020). Students value its ability to manage professional and educational demands, provide independence, and accommodate

diverse preferences (Khalil et al., 2020). Studies, including Amer et al. (2022) and Basar et al. (2021), provide insights and recommendations for improving the quality of e-learning strategies. For instance, they highlight the importance of interactive and engaging content, personalised learning experiences constructed to individual needs, clear communication channels, and timely feedback mechanisms (Amer et al., 2022; Basar et al., 2021). These examples highlight the quality aspects that contribute to effective e-learning strategies, ensuring a more enriching and impactful learning experience for students (Amer et al., 2022; Basar et al., 2021).

The efficacy of e-learning strategies is closely dependent on the quality of the content and the level of engagement it emphasises. Students prefer meticulously crafted, current materials and value interactivity (Amer et al., 2022; Basar et al., 2021; Shen & Ho, 2020). Strong support systems and accessible feedback are crucial in engaging lecturers and students (Awan et al., 2022; Maphoto, 2021). Universities should address challenges such as lack of motivation, distractions, and data security for effective e-learning adoption (Amer et al., 2022; Basar et al., 2021). Universities must adapt their e-learning strategies to modern preferences or risk operating under outdated practices (Amer et al., 2022; Basar et al., 2021).

E-Learning Strategies for English Competence in ODeL

E-learning strategies, as mentioned by Miao et al. (2021), play a pivotal role in enhancing English competence, providing a versatile pathway for skill development. Miao et al. (2021) assert that personalised, adaptive learning platforms like Duolingo and assessment and learning in knowledge spaces (ALEKS) yield positive outcomes by creating content based on individual performance. Bao's research in 2020 and Wiphasith et al.'s findings in 2016 highlight how these platforms employ algorithms for customised education, focusing on students' future professional needs.

Moreover, adaptive e-learning strategies lessen the difficulty of an activity and ensure an optimal challenge level for skill development. Universities that utilise advanced technologies can maximise the English language competence of their students (Miao et al., 2021). For Miao et al. (2021), collaborative e-learning through group projects and virtual team activities mirrors real-world workplace communication and supports peer interaction. This approach not only prompts the practical application of language skills but also encourages constructive peer feedback (Al-Adwan et al., 2022; Maphoto, 2021).

The Impact of e-Learning Strategies on Workplace English Competence

E-learning strategies wield a dual influence on workplace English competence, with a notable impact outlined by Abou El-Seoud et al. (2014). While platforms such as Rosetta Stone and Babbel provide structured lessons and practical exercises that enhance competence, inadequately designed modules can impede that competence (Abou El-Seoud et al., 2014; Buragohain et al., 2013). Advantages include flexibility and accessibility (Abou El-Seoud et al., 2014; Buragohain et al., 2023). Conversely, Alzahrani (2020) and Ramos-Morcillo et al. (2020) argue that e-learning strategies may lack the necessary social dimensions, particularly in support of speaking and listening skills. Speaking and listening skills are crucial to human interaction

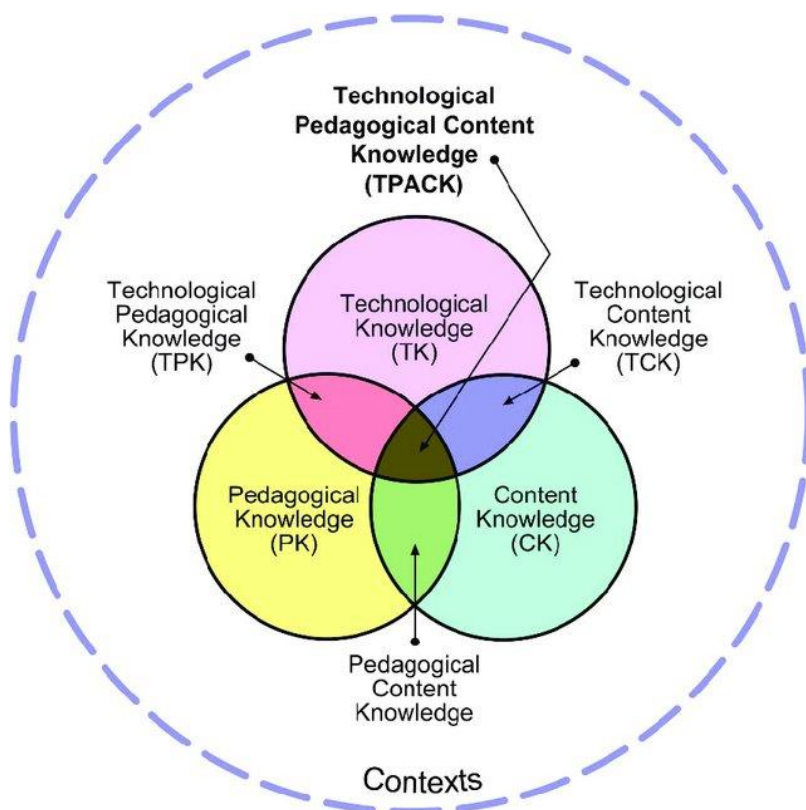
(Ramos-Morcillo et al., 2020). Long (2017) states the importance of individual motivation and self-discipline, indicating that without structured strategies, students may struggle to remain engaged. To improve e-learning strategies for workplace English competence, a multi-faceted approach is essential (Cheng & Chen, 2015). Blending online resources with real-world language practice can mitigate e-learning limitations, ensuring students acquire both knowledge and practical language skills for effective workplace communication (Cheng & Chen, 2015; Long, 2017).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs the TPACK framework as its central model, given its importance in understanding the knowledge base required for effective technology integration in education (Koehler & Mishra, 2008). TPACK, initially introduced by Mishra and Koehler in 2006 and later renamed TPACK to reinforce its integration, is chosen as it addresses the relationships between technology, pedagogy, and content knowledge, as shown in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1.

The components of the TPACK framework (Schmidt et al., 2009, p. 124).



According to Koehler and Mishra (2008), the TPACK framework comprises three interrelated knowledge domains: Technological knowledge (TK), pedagogical knowledge (PK), and content knowledge (CK). TK is crucial as it pertains to understanding and effectively implementing e-learning tools and technologies (Koehler & Mishra, 2008). Lecturers must be well-versed in the technological aspects of e-learning platforms and strategies used, thus

ensuring seamless implementation (Koehler & Mishra, 2008). Moreover, lecturers and instructional designers involved in delivering e-learning content need a solid grasp of the technical aspects to create user-friendly and accessible digital resources. In this regard, the study's primary objective is to examine the significance of e-learning strategy selections, platform choices, and the level of technical support provided to students to achieve academic success. Furthermore, TK allows for the selection and integration of technology to meet the specific needs of students, addressing accessibility and usability issues in a diverse technological environment (Koehler & Mishra, 2008). Equally, PK is essential, as it comprises the principles and strategies of effective teaching and learning (Koehler & Mishra, 2008). In this study, PK influences the design of instructional strategies adapted to the unique requirements of workplace English competence in the South African context (Koehler & Mishra, 2008). According to PK, lecturers should match teaching methods with e-learning technologies, ensuring the digital resources are engaging, interactive, and supportive of various learning styles (Koehler & Mishra, 2008; Schmid et al., 2020). This alignment is highlighted by TPACK, demonstrating the integration of technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge (Koehler & Mishra, 2008; Lekhu, 2023; Mosia & Matabane, 2022; Schmid et al., 2020). When implemented successfully, this integration can notably improve the quality and relevance of e-learning experiences (Schmid et al., 2020).

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

A qualitative approach, as noted by Aspers and Corte (2019), is an iterative process that enriches the scientific community's understanding through a meticulous exploration of the topic. This method is well-suited for the current research, as it allows for an extensive investigation into how e-learning strategies impact workplace English competence within an ODeL university in South Africa. In contrast, quantitative research may fall short in capturing the critical details and contextual factors essential for comprehending the subjective experiences of students (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Qualitative instruments, including open-ended evaluation questions and observations, excel in the collection of comprehensive and profound data, aligning with the application of the TPACK theory (Hollin et al., 2020). According to Aspers and Corte (2019), qualitative approaches allow participants to express their experiences and perspectives on the phenomenon. Moreover, as outlined by Thomas (2021), combining a case study design with qualitative approaches enhances the exploration of specific issues or phenomena within the defined system. Consequently, the present study utilises both a qualitative approach and a case study design to examine the group.

Population and participants

A population is the entirety of individuals or items that share a common and defining characteristic or set of characteristics, forming the central focus of a study or analysis (Lee et al., 2021). For this specific research, the population encompassed the entirety of students within

the module, totaling approximately 10,000 students. The researchers study used a purposive sampling method to deliberately select 30 responses from around 100 students who completed open-ended evaluation questions. This method ensured that participants were chosen based on specific criteria, including their experience with e-learning strategies and their willingness to engage in the study, aligning with the research objectives. The sample size for qualitative research is not set in stone; it varies depending on such factors as the type of data collected (Lichtman, 2010, p. 142; Vasileiou et al., 2018). In this study, a sample of 100 students from a population of 10,000 was appropriate for the precision and accuracy of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The data may be sufficient to achieve data saturation and represent different perspectives (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2015). The criteria for selection included the student's experience with the e-learning strategies and their willingness to participate in the study. Moodle learning management system (LMS) observations, which aimed to answer the third research question, covered site appearance, content structure, forum use, lecturer-student interactions, student collaboration, lecturer communication, resource availability, e-learning strategies, tool implementation, and information accessibility to enrich the study's findings (Campbell et al., 2020; Petty et al., 2012).

Instruments

Two qualitative research instruments were employed: Open-ended evaluation questions and an observation schedule (Del Gobbo et al., 2023; Ferrario & Stantcheva, 2022). The instruments were utilised to answer the research questions as follows:

- RQ 1: How do Mod15 students perceive the effectiveness of e-learning strategies in improving their English competence?
- RQ 2: What are the specific challenges faced by Mod15 students in acquiring English language skills through e-learning strategies?
- RQ 3: What e-learning strategies are currently implemented in Mod15, and how effective are they in enhancing the learning experience?

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection for this study took place over a three-week period in August 2023. Open-ended evaluation questions were distributed via Microsoft Forms through an announcement on Moodle, and an observation schedule was prepared for additional insights. To uphold ethical considerations, a consent form was made available on the Moodle site that allowed all willing participants to voluntarily sign up for participation. Following this period, the collected data underwent meticulous analysis and organisation into thematic categories, aligning with Creswell and Poth's (2018) recommended approach. Thematic analysis, described as an "independent and a reliable qualitative approach to analysis" (Vaismoradi et al., 2013, p. 400), was employed to organise data obtained through the open-ended evaluation question schedule and the observation schedule. This analytical approach involves identifying patterns, trends, and themes within the data and interpreting their meanings (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). To improve the study's reliability, the researchers used methodological triangulation, which combined open-ended

evaluation questions and observations (Heale & Forbes, 2013). Further, the study's reliability was ensured through a multifaceted approach, maintaining inter-rater reliability by having multiple researchers independently analysed a subset of the collected data. The level of agreement among them was assessed, providing a detailed strategy to instil confidence in the study's outcomes. Finally, validity was ensured through the alignment of research instruments with TPACK theory and expert validation (Cohen et al., 2017).

FINDINGS

In this section, the findings were organised in line with the following themes:

- Students' perceptions of e-learning strategies.
- Challenges in acquiring English language skills through e-learning strategies.
- E-learning strategies in the module: Types and effectiveness.

Students' perceptions of e-learning strategies

The findings presented in this section are based on RQ 1 and RQ 2 of the study, which are formulated as follows:

- RQ 1: How do Mod15 students perceive the effectiveness of e-learning strategies in improving their English competence?
- RQ 2: What are the specific challenges faced by Mod15 students in acquiring English language skills through e-learning strategies?

Many students had positive perceptions of e-learning strategies, mentioning that they had benefited from the current e-learning strategies. Participant 1 stated, "I enjoy the English group, which helped me a lot. I also use study material to complete my assessments." Participant 1 also indicated their enjoyment of the English Telegram group [a social media group] and mentioned the benefits they had received from other study materials accessible on the LMS. The response indicates that the current e-learning strategies are enjoyable and have greatly boosted Participant 1's skills in workplace-related English tasks. This shows that tools, such as extra resources, are effective in improving their English learning experience.

Similarly, Participant 2 found the tools effective in boosting their self-esteem. They mentioned, "Now, I am able to do everything on my own, and I have gained self-esteem." Participant 2 conveyed that the e-learning strategies empowered them to work independently, leading to increased self-esteem. The comment from Participant 2 reveals that the e-learning strategies employed in the module enhanced language competence and positively impacted their learning confidence, displaying the broader benefits of e-learning.

In addition, Participant 3 found that the e-learning strategies provided convenience. Participant 3 felt that "there is so much to learn and acquire in a short space of time, at your convenience." The participant's response highlighted the convenience provided by e-learning strategies such as announcements, additional resources, vodcasts, podcasts, live-streaming sessions, and virtual classes' recordings. Participant 3's responses highlight the practicality of e-learning, particularly for students needing efficient knowledge acquisition on their terms. Furthermore,

participants 4 and 5 also expressed positive perceptions of e-learning strategies. Participant 4 expressed their sentiment towards e-learning strategies: "I learned a lot of things, and I must say I am really impressed." Participant 5 mentioned, "I enjoy the podcasts and live-streaming sessions," indicating a positive engagement with multimedia elements of e-learning.

Conversely, Participant 6's perspective provided a more complex analysis. "I don't find the strategies necessarily motivating at all; yeah, once in a while they help in clarifying some information in the study guide." Although Participant 6 did not find the e-learning strategies motivating, they did recognise the essential role the tools played in bridging the information gaps in the workbook and the study guide. Participant 6 also noted the importance of these tools in providing additional layers of examples, which they deemed crucial for solitary learning. The diverse student responses reflect a range of perceptions and experiences with e-learning strategies. Nonetheless, the opposing perspective presented by Participant 6 implies the necessity to reassess the effectiveness of e-learning strategies. Some conveyed enjoyment, self-esteem, and convenience, while others highlighted the importance of these tools as supplementary resources. These varied perspectives highlight the multifaceted impact of e-learning strategies on workplace language competence, showing that these approaches can provide effective learning, personal growth, and flexibility in learning styles.

Participant 7 stated that e-learning strategies were "easy to access." This could be seen as suggesting that the university's platform is user-friendly and accessible, which is crucial for the online learning experience. However, Participant 8 found the e-learning platform was not so easily accessible, stating, "I struggle a bit; sometimes it is hard to access the online platform due to poor connectivity." This points to a potential issue that needs attention, as accessibility and ease of use are essential for a smooth learning experience. The response from Participant 8 could be indicative of connectivity, technical, or interface challenges that need addressing. Participants 9 and 10 mentioned their positive communication experiences with lecturers. They appreciated the convenience and effectiveness of communicating with their lecturers through online channels such as Telegram and online discussion forums (ODFs). This indicates that these strategies have succeeded in creating a conducive environment for students to seek assistance and engage with their lecturers. Participant 9 said, "these tools help me a lot with communication in a formal format inside the organisation." Participant 10 supported this further through the statement, "I can communicate with my lecturers whenever I need assistance and through our online classes." However, Participant 11 had a contrasting perspective:

"I am very happy with the number of assistant videos and presentations that have been provided. However, I find the lack of discussion forums a negative factor. This platform is needed as it allows students to interact with each other and provide help and support to each other."

Participant 11 presents a different viewpoint by expressing dissatisfaction with the lack of discussion forums. They stated the importance of such a forum for student interaction,

support, and reducing repetitive queries to lecturers. The comment also highlights a potential issue. A broken link to the discussion forum, which needs immediate attention. While some students appreciated the existing communication channels and ease of access, others expressed concerns about accessibility and the absence of discussion forums, perhaps due to other reasons not shared in the open-ended evaluation questions. However, feedback from Participant 11 foregrounds the importance of addressing technical issues promptly and considering the benefits of supporting student interaction and support through online forums. This feedback loop is essential for continuous improvement in the online education system at UOD.

Students were enthusiastic about the improvements that e-learning strategies have made to their language skills. They listed many skills they had acquired using the e-learning strategies. Participant 12 expressed enthusiasm for their improved writing skills, saying, “before I registered this module, I was failing to construct a sentence.” Participant 13 voiced similar sentiments, saying that “at least now I can write properly.” Participant 14 was one of the few that mentioned the benefit the tools had on their workplace English skills: “now I know how to write minutes of the meeting and memorandum at work.” These are some of the expected skills in a professional context. This was seconded by Participant 15, who said, “strategies were effective in improving my workplace English competence because I’ve learned from how other students and lecturers write in the forums.” Moreover, Participant 16 said, “It is helping a lot in understanding the formal way of writing reports in the workplace.” These findings suggest that e-learning has real-world applications for students to enhance their professional communication skills.

Participant 17 made a profound statement about the strides that e-learning was making for the teaching paradigm, stating, “it is an effective way to build general pedagogical knowledge and increase the effectiveness of the instruction.” This indicates that e-learning benefits students’ language skills and has the potential to improve teaching methodologies and instructional practices. This is seconded by Participant 18, who stated, “it is very effective, and it literally made a huge impact on my English and my continuous learning skills.” This supports a mindset of lifelong learning and aligns with the goals of education, such as developing skills and abilities that extend beyond the lecturers’ teaching objectives. Finally, Participants 19 and 20, both ESL speakers, noted the positive changes in their communication. Participant 19 was one of many ESL speakers that mentioned the achievements that e-learning strategies facilitated: “now I can see the way I communicate in these groups [because it] is strictly English, so now I’m more familiar, and I don’t just speak; I am now thinking before I talk.” This is supported by Participant 20, who said, “it strengthens the way I speak at work.” These findings reinforce the value of e-learning strategies as versatile and effective tools for language education and personal growth.

Challenges in acquiring English language skills through e-learning strategies

Participant 21 made a comment that highlights a critical issue that has become even more prominent in recent times, especially with the widespread adoption of e-learning and remote education: “I do not have a laptop; my internet connectivity is poor.” This is a reflection of the challenges faced by numerous students who lack the necessary resources for effective digital learning. Further, it highlights the digital divide, a term used to describe the gap between those who have access to modern information and communication technologies (ICTs) and those who do not. In this context, it may refer to the unequal access to devices (laptops or computers) and reliable internet connectivity, which is vital for online learning. This was brought to the fore by many others, such as Participant 22, who stated that they struggled to maximise the use of e-learning strategies due to “the current South African load shedding schedule, which affects the network connectivity.” Load shedding involves a deliberate interruption of power (electricity) to alleviate the strain on the system caused by simultaneous high demand. This highlights infrastructure challenges that can hinder e-learning efforts. Load shedding, or scheduled power cuts, is a common issue in some regions, which disrupts the availability of electricity necessary to power devices and maintain an internet connection. Network issues further compound the problem, making it difficult for students to connect to online classes or access educational materials. The reality of this situation is supported by Participant 23, who states, “not exactly except the obvious load shedding that contributes to network problems.” Participant 24 stated that they had to deal with “network problems, link errors, and session expiration,” indicating that there may be glitches in the UOD online system. For effective e-learning, students and lecturers depend on these systems to function seamlessly. Technical glitches can disrupt the learning experience and possibly lead to frustration and reduced productivity. This was a major concern raised by Participant 25, who stated, “the system sometimes is off and disadvantages us from doing our schoolwork.” Concerns raised by participants in this section suggest that the online platform's unreliability and instability have a direct impact on the academic experiences of students.

Many universities understand the necessity of student collaboration and, thus, the importance of the ODFs communicating with lecturers and collaborating with students and material. However, due to technical errors, the discussion forum is absent this semester. Participant 26 called attention to this challenge, stating, “the absence of a discussion forum and other means to promptly connect with peers and lecturers makes it challenging for me to ensure that I am progressing in the right direction.” ODFs are a vital platform for asking questions, sharing insights, and clarifying doubts. The statement from Participant 26 highlights how the absence of ODFs can leave students feeling isolated and uncertain about their academic progress. Participant 27 further stated that “the learning class videos cannot be downloaded if you miss the class.” This is of concern, as the lessons are used to support students. Learning materials, including recorded lectures, are crucial for students who require additional support or need to review content. Inaccessible materials can place certain students at a disadvantage

and hinder their ability to catch up on missed lessons. Furthermore, Participant 28 highlighted the need for further online support to enhance student e-learning progress by stating that

“as an English speaker, I know where to find additional resources to help me, but if I were not an English native speaker or struggling with a more basic computer literacy as well as business vocabulary, then I would appreciate links to helpful sites and tools such as ‘Deeply Write’. I use this tool, for my German work correspondence and find it to be a hugely helpful tool and learning tool as it gives you possibilities and suggestions for different writing styles and grammar.”

This perspective from Participant 28 highlights the importance of acknowledging and addressing the diverse needs of students, especially those who are not native English speakers or who may have varying levels of computer literacy. In addition, Participant 29 stated that “I am in between because, from my side. I was used to having a textbook in front of me; textbooks are in fact needed for other modules.” The participant’s experience reflects a common sentiment among students who are more accustomed to traditional teaching methods and learning materials. Many students are comfortable with physical textbooks and the traditional classroom environment. Transitioning to digital resources and online platforms can be daunting without proper e-learning support. This was further supported by Participant 29, who felt that additional support was needed to orient students to online learning. They stated, “doing online presentations can make e-learning more effective.” Online presentations, when designed effectively, can serve as a bridge between traditional learning and e-learning, making the transition smoother for students. This is further supported by Participant 30, who stated that “constant e-tutorials and meetings” are needed to improve the e-learning experience. The importance of ongoing support and engagement in an e-learning context is thus highlighted. Regular tutorials and meetings can provide students with opportunities to clarify doubts, receive feedback, and interact with lecturers and peers, thereby enhancing their learning experience. Transitioning to e-learning often necessitates a shift in pedagogical approaches. Lecturers should provide digital resources and adapt their teaching methods to suit the online context.

E-learning strategies in the module: Types and effectiveness

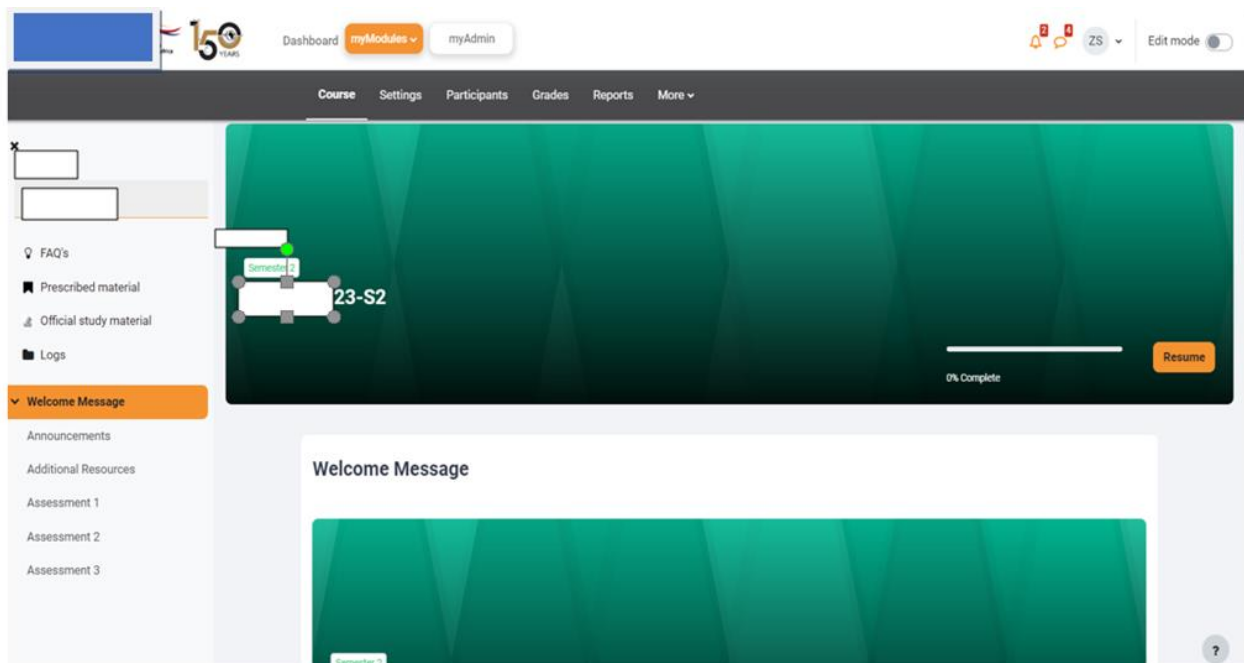
This section addresses RQ 3 of the study, which reads: What e-learning strategies are currently implemented in the module, and how effective are they in enhancing the learning experience? The observations made are closely related to the layout and functionality of the e-learning strategies used by students. In this observation section, the researchers explored how students access e-learning materials to improve their workplace English skills. The relevant observation is the central role of the welcome page, consisting of various tiles, including an additional resources tile, where all e-learning materials are posted, as depicted in Figure 2.

This observation suggests that students frequently rely on this page for updates, information, and possibly module-related content. Figure 2 provides insights into how lecturers are currently using the e-learning platform for communication and information dissemination. In addition, this observation implies that lecturers may see the announcement page as a central

channel for conveying important updates, module information, or perhaps even supplementary materials related to workplace English competence.

Figure 2.

Welcome message tile on the module site



This aspect of communication may be considered an e-learning strategy aimed at enhancing students' understanding and engagement with module content. Furthermore, there are instructions and explanations on the welcome page, as well as a list of e-learning tools available on Moodle. The welcome page is depicted in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3.

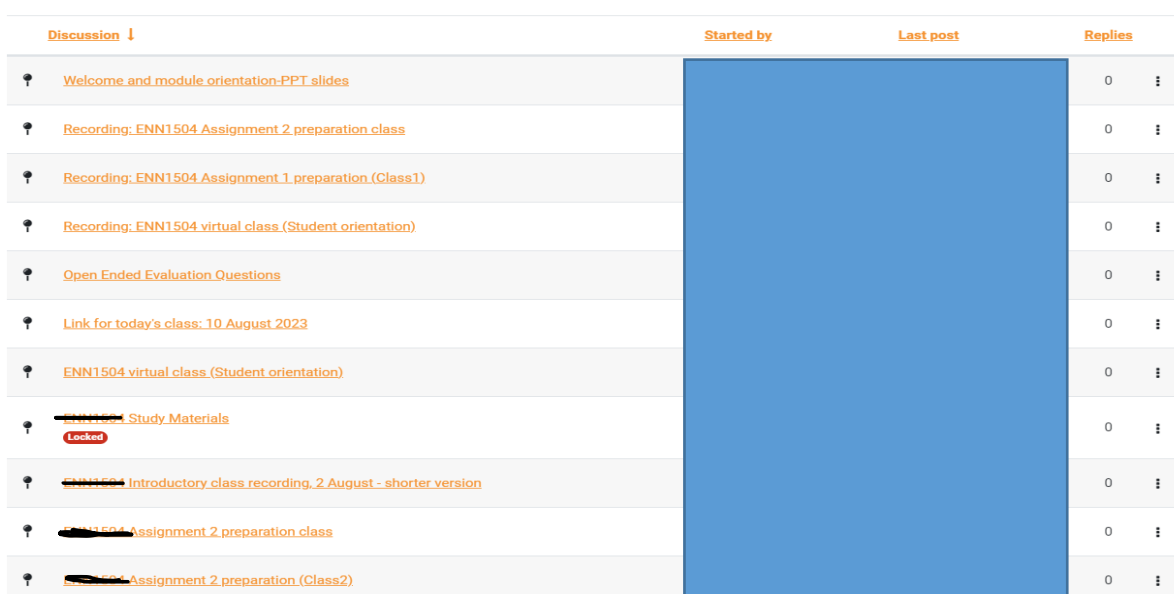
The welcome message page

- Welcome to Practising Workplace English** (S [redacted])
 As the name suggests, this module is about writing workplace documents, and the best way to improve writing is through reading and writing.
- First things first, please work through **Tutorial Letter 101** to get the essence of the module, assessment requirements as well as pertinent **due dates for your assignments**. You are advised to read all the information written in the tutorial letter. Please do not jump to assignment contents as that will be a grave mistake. After reading **Tutorial Letter 101** (make notes and highlights to ascertain understanding), you can then work through the **Study Guide and the Workbook**. Remember to keep a study notebook so you can work through your materials in a more systematic manner.
- You will also find various resources that you can use on this main module site in the tools that are listed in the Navigation Panel on the left of your screen. These include:
- Discussion Forums** **Discussion Forums** – the General Subject Related Discussions forum is primarily for students to communicate freely with each other. Try to contribute in a meaningful and constructive way so other students can benefit from your comments. To avoid repetition and confusion, before posting queries or comments, check if your issue has already been addressed. Other forums and topics will be created to provide a space where you can communicate with each other about whatever section of the course you are busy with. Lecturers and e-tutors will generally observe and sometimes participate in these discussions.
- Announcements** **Announcements** – lecturers or e-tutors will post **announcements**, with or without email notifications. It is your responsibility to check all announcements posted on announcement shell. It is advisable to practise this frequently.
- Additional Resources** **Additional Resources** – various folders will be created to make a range of documents and other resources available. Use these documents to support your learning and application of knowledge.
- You can download **study material** from the Official Study Material shell.
- Podcasts and Livestream sessions** - we will sometimes send information in the form of podcasts and vodcasts. Please use these resources as they are made for your benefit. Sometimes listening to something or seeing the information enhances understanding of what has been read, so use these resources for your benefit.
- FAQs** **FAQs** - before you email lecturers with a query, please read the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) for answers to many questions that students usually ask. We update this list as we notice common concerns for students. Visit this tool as often as possible for an immediate response to your query.

The information found in the welcome message on Moodle extends to include explicit instructions, crucial details, and a potential listing of available e-learning tools. This content is designed to serve as a central communication point between lecturers and students, with the overarching goal of guiding students, providing essential information, and facilitating their navigation and interaction within the e-learning context. Apart from the welcome message page, there is an announcement page. This page may contain messages from lecturers, notifications about upcoming events or assignments, and any other relevant announcements. Its purpose is to keep students well-informed about the most recent developments and changes within the module, as illustrated in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4.

The announcement page with links to virtual lessons and reminders



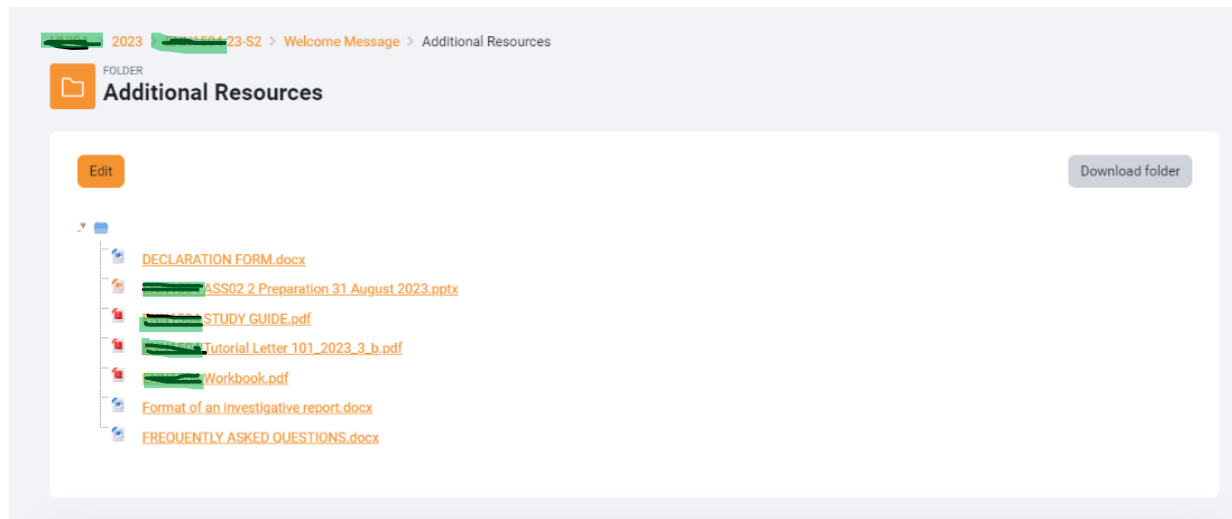
Discussion ↓	Started by	Last post	Replies
↑ Welcome and module orientation-PPT slides			0
↑ Recording: ENN1504 Assignment 2 preparation class			0
↑ Recording: ENN1504 Assignment 1 preparation (Class1)			0
↑ Recording: ENN1504 virtual class (Student orientation)			0
↑ Open Ended Evaluation Questions			0
↑ Link for today's class: 10 August 2023			0
↑ ENN1504 virtual class (Student orientation)			0
↑ ENN1504 Study Materials Locked			0
↑ ENN1504 Introductory class recording, 2 August - shorter version			0
↑ ENN1504 Assignment 2 preparation class			0
↑ ENN1504 Assignment 2 preparation (Class2)			0

In this segment, the researchers observed that the announcement page on Moodle consists of an active platform where lecturers can disseminate essential information and updates to students. It typically includes messages directly from lecturers, serving as a channel for communication regarding important module-related matters. This page can feature alerts about upcoming events, reminders for assignments, and any other pertinent announcements deemed necessary for student awareness. The researchers further observed that the announcement page facilitates efficient communication between lecturers and students, ensuring that crucial information is readily accessible. In essence, it plays a pivotal role in maintaining an informed and engaged learning community by providing a space for timely and relevant announcements within the Moodle platform. Figure 5 below depicts the additional resources' page.

In this section, the researchers, when examining the additional resources section, observed the variety of e-learning materials and tools provided to support students in their learning journey. The researchers noted that this section included supplementary readings, multimedia resources, or links to external materials that complemented the module content.

Figure 5.

The additional resources page with the links to resources



Additionally, the researchers noticed the organisation of these resources, evaluating how well they are curated to enhance student understanding of the module content. The observation of the additional resources allows researchers to gauge the extent to which the educational platform facilitates active learning by providing a diverse array of materials to aid students in their academic endeavours. Findings from both instruments are discussed in the subsequent section.

DISCUSSION

The researchers explored the findings related to the three research questions (RQ 1, RQ 2, and RQ 3) within the context of the TPACK framework. The researchers explored how e-learning strategies, aligned with the TPACK framework, influence students' workplace English competence, including their perceptions and challenges.

In responding to RQ 1, students painted a clear picture of positivity, expressing the effectiveness and convenience of e-learning strategies. The improved self-esteem of students implies that e-learning extends beyond content delivery, aligning with broader educational goals such as nurturing critical thinking skills, promoting digital literacy, and encouraging lifelong learning habits. Student praise for the convenience of e-learning tools indicates their flexibility, catering to various learning styles. Positive experiences in the module demonstrate the successful integration of e-learning strategies, underscoring a clear combination of technological tools, pedagogical practices, and content delivery within the TPACK framework (Khalil et al., 2020; Koehler & Mishra, 2008; Regmi & Jones, 2020). Students' endorsement of e-learning strategies as an integral supplement to traditional materials further explores the indispensable nature of e-learning tools in reinforcing content and creating a context-rich learning experience (Amer et al., 2022). However, the discussion took a turn as one student

recognised the role of discussion boards in facilitating effective communication, which links with the collaborative emphasis of the TPACK framework (Koehler & Mishra, 2008; Schmidt et al., 2009). Other students indicated the ease of access to study materials, which then highlights the crucial role of user-friendly interfaces in foregrounding technological knowledge (Koehler & Mishra, 2008). Yet some students' accessibility challenges pointed to potential technical issues, indicating the need for functional technological support (Basar et al., 2021).

On a positive note, many students' positive experiences with communication added a positive layer to this discussion. These diverse perceptions highlighted how e-learning strategies cover various facets of the TPACK framework, integrating technology, pedagogy, and content knowledge to enhance workplace English competence (Koehler & Mishra, 2008; Schmid et al., 2020). Moving beyond individual experiences, students' transformative journeys underlined how e-learning strategies significantly enhance language skills, address writing struggles, and build confidence (Abou el Seoud et al., 2014; Cheng & Chen, 2015; Miao et al., 2021; Ramos-Morcillo et al., 2020). Students' focus on understanding formal report writing prompts reflections on adapting e-learning to meet evolving job market demands (Cheng & Chen, 2015; Long, 2017). The impact of e-learning strategies extends beyond the student, as is seen in students' acknowledgment of their role in building pedagogical knowledge (Abou El-Seoud et al., 2014). The discussion prompts an exploration of e-learning strategies that facilitate continuous learning beyond formal education, particularly for preparing for workplace duties (Buragohain et al., 2023).

Concerns expressed by students brought to light the potential reality of the digital divide and exposed the urgency of addressing technology-related disparities among students (Awan et al., 2022). In the investigation of challenges faced by students, struggles with load shedding and network issues were noted, which in a way indicated a window into the infrastructural obstacles that can impede effective e-learning, detailing the critical role of technological infrastructure. In addition, students' encounters with network problems, link errors, and session expirations further indicated the necessity for robust and efficient technological systems in e-learning contexts (Awan et al., 2022; Long, 2017). The experiences of students, specifying the occasional unavailability of the system, show the negative impacts of technological glitches on the learning experience in the module (Abou El-Seoud et al., 2014). Moreover, students' perspectives added another layer to the discussion, highlighting the need for online support catering to the diverse student population. The study highlights the significance of providing for the unique needs of ESL and EAL students and ensuring accessible resources in the e-learning context (Cheng & Chen, 2015). These varied experiences may prompt lecturers to reflect on how they can tackle these challenges.

The e-learning arsenal, from announcements to tutorial letters, forms a constellation of tools aimed at practically applying and refining workplace English skills. The study's lens zoomed into the e-learning context's layout, exploring how students use these e-learning tools to enhance their language competence. The welcome page takes centre stage, a portal guiding

students to the crucial announcement page for updates and information. This observation ignites discussions on user-friendly design, content organisation, and student engagement (Long, 2017; Miao et al., 2021). The strategic interplay between the welcome and announcement pages, directing students effectively, signals a purposeful use of e-learning as a communication channel. This places announcements at the forefront, triggering conversations on increasing this hub for engagement and aligning it with student needs. Clear instructions and user-friendly design, as observed, highlight efforts to enhance usability. The discussion highlights e-learning platforms' active role in developing workplace English skills through design and communication strategies. The observation that all links direct users to the announcement page highlighted the multi-faceted role of the e-learning platform as a clear conduit between lecturers and students. This underlines the pivotal role of announcements in conveying module information, prompting discussions on refining the announcement page for optimal engagement and customisation (Al-Adwan et al., 2022; Awan et al., 2022).

Centralising critical updates on the welcome page was revealed as a strategic move to minimising the risk of students missing essential messages in the vast expanse of online learning. Sending informative announcements becomes an empowering tool for students to manage their learning journey effectively (Buragohain et al., 2023; Ramos-Morcillo et al., 2020). The observation of additional resources in e-learning strategies emerged as a beacon for enhancing student learning experiences. These resources extend beyond the core curriculum, providing students with avenues for deeper engagement and skill refinement. While they enrich the learning experience, it also opens discussions on refining their delivery and adaptation. The additional resources are essential for bridging the gap between English language competence and communication skills relevant to the workplace. They also spark discussions on how lecturers can best prepare their students for the wide range of challenges that arise in real-world professional settings (Alzahrani, 2020; Cheng & Chen, 2015; Hensley et al., 2023; Sevnarayan, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore how e-learning strategies impact workplace English competence within South Africa's OdeL context. The investigation compiled diverse student perspectives, covering satisfaction, self-esteem, and convenience. Students also discussed challenges, including accessibility issues and the need for interactive platforms, contextualised within South Africa's educational context. The study noted approaches to enhance e-learning effectiveness, such as redefining teaching methods and promoting lifelong learning. Perspectives from ESL students revealed significant improvements in English communication skills, indicating linguistic confidence and inclusivity amid South Africa's linguistic diversity. The findings highlighted the unique experiences and perceptions within South Africa's educational context while also accentuating e-learning's transformative potential for personalised student development. These diverse perspectives and highlighted challenges indicate the necessity for continuous

innovation and improvement within educational universities such as UOD to fully utilise the benefits of e-learning.

Recommendations

Building on the study's insights and the specific needs of students seeking to enhance workplace English through e-learning strategies, future research should investigate the challenges of technological accessibility across diverse regions. Investigating variations in internet infrastructure, device availability, and digital literacy levels can inform targeted interventions. In addition, exploring the long-term impact of e-learning on graduates' employability and career advancement in the South African job market can provide significant perspectives. Research into the scalability and sustainability of e-learning strategies, particularly in under-resourced areas, is essential for promoting educational equity. In closing, the imperative exploration of how e-learning strategies can effectively address socio-economic disparities and reduce educational disparities in South Africa can be a vital point for future research.

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