



## Podcasts or Vodcasts? Exploring First-Year Students' Preferences for Enhancing Academic Writing Skills

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### ABSTRACT

First-year students in a distance learning institution face academic writing challenges arising from inadequate writing skills developed in high school, the need to adapt to new writing standards, and limited language proficiency. These challenges could potentially lead to higher dropout rates, increased failures, and delayed qualification completion. Specific writing challenges include producing suitable academic content, adhering to academic writing conventions, using one's own voice, citation and referencing, and style. To aid these students, podcasts and vodcasts were introduced for a student body of approximately 30,000. Transactional Distance Theory and Community of Inquiry framework underpinned the study. In addition, the study collected data using online open-ended evaluation questions and focus group discussions. Vodcasts gained preference due to their visual-auditory approach, aligning with tech-savvy students' preferences. Vodcasts effectively improve academic writing by demonstrating concepts visually. Vodcasts reduced transactional distance between students and lecturers, encouraging collaborative learning and reducing the isolation factor. While podcasts were less preferred, they enhanced listening skills and sparked interest in the subject matter. Based on the findings, the study proposed guidelines for impactful vodcast creation, showing vodcasts' effectiveness in addressing distance learning writing issues, enhancing engagement, collaboration, and understanding.

### KEYWORDS

Academic writing; first-year students' challenges; ODeL; podcasts; student support; vodcasts.

## INTRODUCTION

First-year students in South Africa encounter numerous challenges with academic writing stemming from inadequacies in their high school preparation (Barton, 1994; Bharuthram, 2012; Bharuthram, 2017; Boughey & McKenna, 2016; Gee, 2000; Hassan et al., 2021; Lee, 2020; Leibowitz, 2004; Lentz, 2020; Lentz & Foncha, 2021; Mdogana-Zide & Mukuna, 2023; Street, 1984; Street, 1995). These challenges encompass various aspects, such as grappling with grammatical errors, articulating their thoughts effectively, framing introductions and conclusions, mastering citation and referencing protocols, avoiding plagiarism, constructing coherent paragraphs [including topic sentences, supporting details, pertinent examples, and concluding remarks], honing summarisation skills, and practicing proper paraphrasing techniques (Alostath, 2021; Hassan et al., 2021; Lentz & Foncha, 2021; Ma, 2021; Mdogana-Zide & Mafugu, 2023; Pantuso, 2022; Row, 2022; Williams, 2022). This set of academic writing hurdles is also encountered by ENG101 [pseudonym of the module under study] students, further highlighting the pervasive nature of these challenges. To address and mitigate these academic writing obstacles faced by first-year students, the lecturers of the ENG101 module at UniX [pseudonym of the university under study] have implemented a multifaceted approach. This approach encompasses virtual classes, the provision of feedforward letters [guidance on approaching assignments], the issuance of feedback letters [suggestions for enhancing academic writing and achieving higher grades], the establishment of a dedicated student query platform named “Hot Questions” on the Moodle Learning Management System [LMS], prompt responses to email inquiries, as well as the creation of supplementary multimedia digital tools in the form of podcasts and vodcasts. The focus of the present study centres on exploring the effectiveness of podcasts and vodcasts in addressing academic challenges. As defined by Crofts et al. (2005), the term “podcast” pertains to digitally compressed multimedia audio files that can be downloaded and played on personal devices. According to Javier (2021) and Kiberg and Spilker (2023), a “vodcast” is an abbreviation for “video on demand cast” signifying a visual rendition of a podcast.

The ENG101 student body comprises a significant portion of students who use English as an additional language [EAL] for academic purposes. This diversity is a result of the various ethnic and racial backgrounds represented within the group, many of whom are first-generation university entrants in their families. Notably, several students manage part-time employment across diverse professional fields. This juxtaposition of commitments leads a substantial number of students to allocate their academic efforts to weekends, public holidays, leave days, and the time spent commuting to and from their workplaces. While some students are fully employed, the majority are engaged in part-time work (Fynn, 2021). Given this context, it becomes crucial to offer students a form of support that is both simplified and thought-provoking. This approach is essential to ensuring their retention within the academic system and achieving the desired academic outcomes. The integration of podcasts and vodcasts into the ENG101 module was strategically designed to alleviate the pressure and stress associated with constant page-flipping

while studying academic writing. By incorporating multimedia digital tools that facilitate the teaching of academic writing, students stand to gain immense benefits from these podcasts and vodcasts. Such tools can provide a dynamic and interactive learning experience that resonates with their unique circumstances and learning preferences. To attain this objective, the ensuing research questions were formulated:

- **RQ 1:** Between podcasts and vodcasts, which do you prefer? and,
- **RQ 2:** Why do you prefer podcasts or vodcasts?
- **RQ 3:** Based on the findings derived from the online open-ended evaluation questions and the focus group discussions, what guidelines may be created to enhance the high-quality of podcasts or vodcasts in an ODeL context?

### LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Szymkowiak et al. (2021), the conventional teaching methods of the past are no longer a suitable fit for the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The present generation of learners has shown a clear preference for the integration of modern technology to facilitate and guide their learning experiences in a less intrusive manner. This notion of modern education encompasses the utilisation of pedagogically sound eLearning tools [podcasts and vodcasts] delivered through mobile devices in manageable segments, thereby avoiding overwhelming content delivery. In light of these considerations, an imperative arises to explore the significance of e-learning pedagogical scaffolding within higher education institutions. This exploration involves identifying the diverse scaffolding techniques employed and evaluating their efficacy. Szymkowiak et al. (2021) emphasise that conventional teaching methods, deemed outdated in the contemporary era, no longer align with the preferences of today's tech-savvy student body. Instead, this generation seeks the infusion of cutting-edge technology to facilitate and guide their learning experiences in a less imposing manner. Podcasts and vodcasts are effective at enhancing students' vocabulary, active learning, communication, and academic writing skills (Bueno-Alastuey & Nemeth, 2022; Sheerah & Yadav, 2022; Jovanović-Nikolić & Stojković-Trajković, 2022). Lee (2020) maintains that podcasts and vodcasts are effective for e-learning on teaching and learning academic writing, beneficial for students who struggle academically, improve access to the module's content, are not location-specific or bound, increase listening skills, are reusable, motivate learning as the multimedia files are contemporary, and encourage independence as students can learn at their own pace. Moreover, the incorporation of digital technology appeals to auditory and visual learning styles, enhances academic exploration, counters feelings of isolation, and creates e-learning satisfaction, which stems from lecturer-to-student collaboration. Lecturers can seamlessly share information with students, and students can exchange knowledge amongst themselves. While podcasts offer distinct advantages in higher education, including cost-effectiveness, a wide spectrum of accessible topics, and a relatively modest requirement for digital literacy, it is vital to recognise that they primarily cater

to auditory learners. Thus, a diverse array of teaching materials and methodologies is imperative to cater to the various learning styles present among students.

Strielkowski et al. (2020) and Queiruga-Dios (2020) assert that prevailing educational practices often condition students to conform to lecturers' teaching styles, disregarding how students truly engage, interpret, and acquire [internalise] knowledge. In this setup, the diverse range of learning styles possessed by students frequently goes unnoticed and unaddressed. López-Iñesta (2020), Strielkowski et al. (2020), and Queiruga-Dios (2020) have notably highlighted the issue that students often find themselves adapting to lecturers' instructional approaches, which may not harmonise with their individualised learning preferences and optimal methods of interaction, interpretation, and knowledge acquisition. Consequently, students' unique learning styles are frequently side-lined [overlooked], and inadequately catered for. The core objective of the current study was to leverage multimedia digital tools that align with students' preferences. López-Iñesta (2020) and Queiruga-Dios (2020) emphasise the evolution of the 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge society, which is disseminated with technological teaching tools that vary. Contrarily, Strielkowski et al. (2020) contend that the digitisation of higher education institutions [HEIs] is undoubtedly advantageous, but some students may fear technology and are not ready for online education. Furthermore, Jovanović's study (2021) divulges that first-year students possess limited familiarity with vodcasting and often lack insight into the potential value of vodcasts for language learning. Students are more familiar with podcasts as a supplemental tool. More importantly, there is low exposure to vodcasts in teaching and learning (Jovanović, 2021).

However, a substantial body of recent research within the context of Open Distance e-Learning [ODEL] challenges the assertions discussed by Jovanović (2021) and instead indicates the advantageous nature of podcasts and vodcasts for students in ODeL universities (Faramarzi et al., 2020; Javier, 2021; Lee, 2020; Mohale, 2023; Producers, Travis, & Pownall, 2023; Sevnarayan & Mohale, 2022). Faramarzi et al. (2020) position podcasting and vodcasting as pioneering methods within distance education [DE], offering remote students access to engaging, captivating, and enlightening content that effectively bridges the instructional gap between students and their lecturers. The deployment of vodcasts, combined with other forms of asynchronous lecture recordings, has shown significant benefits in the context of online learning (Cook et al., 2010; Lee, 2020; Veletsianos & Houlden, 2020). Noetel et al. (2021) assert that the transition from traditional learning methods to video-based content had only a minor impact on students' learning outcomes, but the introduction of vodcasts alongside existing teaching methods resulted in substantial improvements. Vodcasts uniquely provide insights into subject matter from the perspective of lecturers, enhancing academic performance (Kyaw et al., 2019; Rianti et al., 2020). Furthermore, Noetel et al. (2021) emphasise that vodcasts empower students to engage with module content at their own pace and convenience while being most effective when coupled with interactive student-teacher and student-student interactions. Students exhibit a preference for vodcasts over conventional lectures due to their capacity to

encourage independence, enhance knowledge acquisition, and present topics in an engaging manner (Khasanova, 2020). Although podcasting offers numerous benefits, evidence suggests that video-based podcasts or vodcasts may be even more efficacious in enriching teaching and learning experiences (Faramarzi et al., 2020). Javier (2021) concurs, highlighting that vodcasting can notably elevate students' perceptions and performance in language learning. Furthermore, the integration of lecturers' voices into recorded multimedia files contributes to the humanisation [personal and relatable connection] of the learning process and module content. By hearing their lecturers' voices, students establish a more personal and relatable connection with the educational material (Maphoto & Suliman, 2024; Prodgers, Travis, & Pownall, 2023). This human touch cultivates connection, empathy, and heightened comprehension. The utilisation of podcasts and vodcasts enables the maximisation of a module's content value through repurposing (Doi et al., 2022; Kenna, 2022; Prodgers, Travis, & Pownall, 2023).

Lee (2020) asserts that podcasts and vodcasts have risen to prominence as indispensable components of DE, playing a pivotal role in delivering interactive and informative content that effectively bridges the transactional gap between remote learners and their lecturers. Furthermore, the utilisation of podcasts and vodcasts demonstrates clear advantages in the context of online teaching and learning, a relevance emphasised by the virtual nature of the present-day student cohort. Strielkowski et al. (2020) acknowledge that while digitisation within HEIs is undoubtedly advantageous, there exists a subset of students who harbour apprehensions towards technology and may not yet be prepared for online education. Nevertheless, a concerted effort to enhance [boost] the quality of online education should include strategies that align, appeal, and cater to students' diverse learning styles.

### **RESEARCH CONTEXT**

The study examines academic writing challenges faced by first-year ENG101 students in a distance-learning institution, UniX. The study proposes podcasts and vodcasts as supplemental tools to enhance academic writing skills. This approach is particularly suitable for UniX's Academic Writing module [ENG101], tailoring content to students' unique needs. The research probes into challenges specific to UniX's ODeL approach, offering insights into writing difficulties and support systems. The findings contribute to academic writing practices in both UniX and similar institutions, shedding light on distance education scenarios. The study's context-specific investigation aids in the understanding and improvement of academic writing practices within specific distance learning environments, aligning with the goal of addressing academic writing challenges in distance education contexts like UniX.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS**

The study incorporates Moore's (1997) Transactional Distance Theory and Garrison, Anderson, and Archer's (2000) Community of Inquiry framework, complementing action research. These frameworks address content delivery issues through multimedia tools, reduce isolation, and

support interactive learning. They guide research in distance learning contexts like UniX, focusing on cognitive, social, and teaching dimensions. Together, these frameworks create an effective learning environment, encouraging deep understanding. By combining them with action research, the study uncovers academic writing challenges and suggests interventions. This holistic approach enhances distance education understanding, refining teaching and learning for modules like ENG101.

## METHODOLOGY

### ***Research approach and design***

Action research, as described by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009, p. 142), involves systematic questioning, data collection, strategy testing, assessment, and reflection to drive future actions. It can be individual or collaborative and aims to enhance teaching, student performance, and lecturers' empowerment (Mills, 2017). It emphasises ongoing inquiry and reflection to tackle practical issues, treating lecturers as scholars. This approach differs from traditional reforms that limit teacher autonomy (Elliot, 1976; Kincheloe, 2003; McNiff, 2016). This study adopts action research to improve writing skills, teaching methods, and multimedia tool implementation. It encompasses problem identification, data collection, interpretation, action, and reflection in a cyclical process, resulting in improved teaching and student outcomes.

### ***Population and sampling***

The concept of "population" in research by Mack et al. (2011) and Pilot and Hungler (1999) encompasses both key informants and a broader category fitting specific criterion. Conversely, "sample" by Brink (1996) and Kenton (2019) is a smaller subset purposefully chosen from a larger collective. In qualitative research, a modest sample size can represent a sizable population. For this study, 10 ENG101 students registered for the ENG101 module during the first semester of 2022 were purposefully selected. Of the 10 ENG101 students, five are male and five are female. Their ages range from 20 to 28 years old. All 10 students are non-native English speakers, with English being their second or third language. They come from disadvantaged backgrounds where internet infrastructures severely malfunction, and they are the first university entrants in their families. The 10 ENG101 students were purposefully selected as key informants to explore academic writing challenges in UniX's ODeL context. Despite limited responses (five students in an online open-ended evaluation questions via LMS Moodle and five in focused group discussions via Microsoft Teams), the qualitative approach prioritises depth of insights (Dworkin, 2012, p. 1). Bernard (2000) suggests around 36 participants for ethnographic studies, while Bertaux (1981) argues that a minimum of 15 is acceptable for qualitative research. This approach, focusing on depth within a smaller participant group, captures rich experiential insights effectively. Pseudonyms were used for anonymity in both groups, maintaining confidentiality.

**Research instruments**

In a study conducted by Afolayan and Oniyinde (2019), Billy (2021), and McLeod (2018), open-ended online evaluation questions emerged as a qualitative research tool, enabling the collection of detailed, descriptive participant responses. This method, adaptable to face-to-face, telephone, or email interactions, serves as an efficient means to gauge preferences, attitudes, behaviours, opinions, and intentions (Sevnarayan, 2022). For the present study, the utilisation of open-ended online evaluation proved fitting, enhanced participants' unhindered sharing of individual experiences devoid of limitations. This approach, congruent with the research objectives, facilitated comprehensive and unobstructed information sharing. Conversely, Stewart (2018, p. 687), Tümen-Akyıldız, and Ahmed (2021) define a focus group as a qualitative data collection method aimed at unearthing hidden participant experiences within a small group context, facilitated by a skilled researcher. Yet, a challenge persists: introverted participants may shy away from expressing their thoughts. To mitigate this, the current study's researcher proactively identified introverted participants and engaged them directly, encouraging active involvement. By inviting these individuals to contribute their insights during focus group discussions, the researcher aimed to create an inclusive, supportive space that welcomed the perspectives of all participants, introverted or otherwise. In this study, qualitative research instruments were used to explore the in-depth experiences of students. The research instruments selected for this study included open-ended online evaluation questions and a focus group discussion. Open-ended online evaluation questions were used to address the first research question, while a focus group discussion provided information for the second research question.

**Online open-ended evaluation question**

As per the guidelines laid out by Braun and Clarke (2021, p. 2) and the methodology outlined by Creswell (2003, p. 192), a systematic approach is essential for precisely transcribing online qualitative data. In the context of this present study, the researcher systematically categorised thematic elements arising from open-ended evaluation questions sourced from online platforms. Furthermore, the researcher constructed distinct categories and thematic frameworks during the examination of evaluation question responses, guided by predetermined criteria. Importantly, in instances where clarity was lacking, proactive engagement with participants was undertaken to extract hidden insights, contributing to a more robust understanding of students' preferences between podcasts and vodcasts.

**Focus group discussions**

In response to the onset of the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, focus group discussions were conducted using Microsoft Teams as a remote communication tool. During these discussions, the researcher meticulously documented the perspectives shared by the participants. Instances of ambiguity or complexity in participants' responses prompted the researcher to actively seek clarification, ensuring the accuracy of data interpretation. The research data underwent deliberate organisation to maintain a coherent and easily comprehensible structure. Aligning

with the methodology applied to the focus group discussion, the analytical process for the focus group discussion adhered rigorously to Braun and Clarke's (2021, p. 2) comprehensive six-phase thematic analysis framework.

### **Data analysis**

Data collected from both the online open-ended evaluation and focus group discussions underwent transcription, followed by a thematic analysis process guided by Braun and Clarke's (2021, p. 2) six-phase approach. This method aligned well with Transactional Distance Theory (Moore, 1973) and Garrison et al.'s (2000) 'community of practice' pedagogical framework, enabling a thorough exploration of the data's subtleties and implications. To structure the analysis, the researchers drew inspiration from Brink and Van der Walt (2006), De Vos et al. (2005), Burns and Grove (2009), and White (2005), emphasising the systematic nature of data analysis. This process involves organising and synthesising research data to uncover the underlying structure and meaning within the collected information. As elucidated by Braun and Clarke (2021, p. 2), thematic analysis involves the meticulous identification, organisation, and revelation of meaningful patterns (themes) embedded within the dataset. Within the scope of this study, themes were skillfully constructed to provide coherent interpretations and presentations of the data. The six-step procedural framework for thematic analysis, as delineated by Braun and Clarke (2021, p. 2), is summarised below in Table 1.

**Table 1.**

Six-step thematic analysis procedure (Braun and Clarke, 2021, p. 2)

Phase		Examples of procedure for each step
1.	Familiarising oneself with the data.	Transcribing data; reading and re-reading; noting down initial codes.
2.	Generating initial codes.	Coding interesting features of the data systematically across the dataset, and collating data relevant to each code.
3.	Searching for the themes.	Collating codes into potential themes and gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4.	Involved in reviewing the themes.	Checking if the themes work about the coded extracts and the entire dataset; generate a thematic 'map'.
5.	Defining and naming themes.	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme; generation of clear names for each theme.
6.	Producing the report.	Final opportunity for analysis: selecting appropriate extracts; discussion of the analysis; relating to the research question or literature; produce the report.

The findings of the study were analysed according to the six-step thematic analysis procedure by Braun and Clarke (2021, p. 2). Accordingly, the study established a structured

framework for data coding, interpretation, and presentation. Themes emerged from online open-ended evaluation questions and focus group discussions, include:

- Students prefer vodcasts over podcasts,
- Vodcasts as quasi-face-to-face virtual emulation, and,
- Guidelines for the creation of vodcasts in an ODeL context.

Themes encompass vital aspects, offering insights for global online learning and South African higher education. They form a strong basis for analysing findings and reflecting current online education. This article-maintained validity and reliability by employing two qualitative research instruments: open-ended online evaluation discussions and focus group discussions. Each instrument served a distinct purpose, contributing to the overall research inquiry. Pre-established questions guided each instrument to ensure consistency and comparability in the data collected. The integration of these qualitative methods allowed them to support and complement each other, enhancing the study's robustness. This approach facilitated the convergence of findings from various sources, perspectives, and methods, leading to a more comprehensive and dynamic understanding of the research topic.

## FINDINGS

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

- Students prefer vodcasts over podcasts,
- Vodcasts as quasi-face-to-face virtual emulation, and,
- Guidelines for the creation of vodcasts in an ODeL context.

### ***Students prefer vodcasts over podcasts***

The findings presented in this section are based on RQ 1, RQ 2 and RQ 3 of the study, which are formulated as follows:

- **RQ 1:** Between podcasts and vodcasts, which do you prefer? and,
- **RQ 2:** Why do you prefer podcasts or vodcasts?
- **RQ 3:** Based on the findings derived from the online open-ended evaluation questions and the focus group discussions, what guidelines may be created to enhance the quality of podcasts or vodcasts in an ODeL context?

Amidst an array of student support interventions and strategies aimed at bridging the transactional distance and developing a community of practice involving both students and lecturers to effectively address and combat the challenges encountered by first-year students in the context of academic writing, the adoption of podcasts and vodcasts as supplementary tools emerges as a notable approach. To assess the feasibility of this approach, a cohort of ten students was engaged through an online open-ended evaluation question. Regrettably, participation was limited, with only five students actively taking part. This interaction was facilitated via the online platform of the ENG101 module, utilising the LMS Moodle. This inquiry sought to discern the preferences of these students regarding the utilisation of either podcasts or vodcasts as multimedia resources. The ensuing analysis focused on five selected responses,

strategically sampled for their relevance to the research question. The students' responses displayed similar responses. Presented below are unaltered verbatim statements provided by the students:

I find that both digital multimedia files are helpful. But if I had to choose, I would choose Vodcasts, as it is a great tool for learning academic writing. I used to struggle with in-text referencing, but after watching a vodcast on how to reference, I immediately understood the importance of referencing (Earl, 2022 online open-ended evaluation questions).

Honestly, vodcasts are good for me. With that said, I also listen to podcasts on my way back from work, but when I need to seriously understand my subject content, I watch vodcasts. Using both is beneficial for me as I am a working mother of two who utilises multimedia at different times (Florence, 2022 online open-ended evaluation questions).

In my opinion, vodcasts are wonderful because they are easy to understand. It is easier for me to understand while watching. So, I consider vodcasts useful. However, to thoroughly understand vodcasts, you need to be in a silent environment to be able to take notes. I also enjoy the fact that I can replay vodcasts as many times as I like (Washington, 2022 online open-ended evaluation questions).

Both podcasts and vodcasts because they assist me a whole lot. I seriously struggled with academic writing, but both helped me, as I am now able to use my voice because I previously used to doubt my approaches to responding to questions and, as a result, foraged for ways of expressing myself. I must say that I am glad to continue using both tools (Lethabo, 2022 online open-ended evaluation questions).

I prefer vodcasts more because they are almost the same as face-to-face learning. With podcasts, I've realised that they improve my listening skills. But with vodcasts, I find that more detailed explanations with demonstrations and information are given. I swear it is impossible to struggle with vodcasts (Kgolofelo, 2022 online open-ended evaluation questions).

The verbatim statements above demonstrate the students' responses to online open-ended evaluation questions. A large proportion of the students expressed a preference for vodcasts as opposed to podcasts. Vodcasts, as an instructional modality, exhibit noteworthy efficacy in the context of the study, particularly within the domain of academic writing. Their efficacy is evident in facilitating comprehension of subject matter, promoting lucidity in understanding, aiding in the cultivation of individualised voices among students, and effectively simulating a quasi-face-to-face educational encounter (Earl, Florence, Washington, Lethabo, Kgolofelo 2022 online open-ended evaluation question). The proclivity towards vodcasts is notably influenced by the provision of illustrative instances, didactic demonstrations, and the inherent capacity to seamlessly navigate and engage with the elucidated themes or subjects.

Based on the findings above, a noteworthy majority (four out of five) of students distinctly expressed their preference for vodcasts over podcasts. This observation aligns with the viewpoints of scholars such as Khasanova (2020), López-Iñesta (2020), Noetel et al. (2021), Szymkowiak et al. (2021), and Queiruga-Dios (2020), who assert that students not only exhibit

a preference for vodcasts over podcasts but also over traditional lectures and prescribed texts. The allure of vodcasts lies in their compatibility with the virtual learning styles of students, creating autonomy, enhancing knowledge acquisition, and delivering topics in a captivating and engaging manner (Khasanova, 2020). In contrast, the diminished popularity of podcasts in this context could potentially stem from their deficiency in visual demonstrations. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the prevailing sentiment is that the current generation gravitates towards modern technological aids that facilitate learning more subtly and adaptively. Contrary to the stance upheld by Jovanović (2021), which asserts that first-year students are not familiar with vodcasting and are unaware of the value of using vodcasts for language learning, this study's findings indicate that despite students' familiarity with podcasting, vodcasts emerge as the preferred choice. The efficacy of vodcasts in enriching students' vocabulary, promoting active learning, enhancing communication skills, and refining academic writing capabilities has been substantiated (Bueno-Alastuey & Nemeth, 2022; Sheerah & Yadav, 2022; Jovanović-Nikolić & Stojković-Trajković, 2022). These researchers collectively endorse the notion that vodcasts stand as a potent tool for advancing various facets of academic competence. However, it is worth acknowledging Jovanović's (2021) viewpoint that first-year students might lack familiarity with vodcasting and the inherent value it holds for language learning. Despite this, the empirical evidence presented within this article contradicts Jovanović's (2021) assertions, as students prefer vodcasts over podcasts.

### ***Vodcasts as quasi-face-to-face virtual emulation***

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 concerning the choice between podcasts and vodcasts. To explore this intricate facet in depth, a focused group discussion was organised, encompassing a cohort of 10 students. However, five students participated in the study. This interaction took place on the Microsoft Teams platform. The selection and inclusion of these five students were particularly fitting for the study due to their enrolment in the academic writing [ENG101] module and active participation. The outcomes of this exploration revealed a spectrum of responses that are unique to their learning experience. Presented below are unaltered verbatim statements provided by the students:

I don't wanna lie; I prefer and value vodcast because it makes understanding of the module much easier. Seeing what is explained ignites passion and interest in my studies because I get motivated to want to do better. Before, I used to struggle alone and feel isolated. But with the use of vodcasts, I have learned a whole lot (Timothy, 2022; focus group discussions).

Vodcasts help me a lot with the subject content because they are more like face-to-face classes, and the given examples are realistic and thought-provoking. I connect with the subject content much better when it is explained using vodcasts as it is easy to understand. Podcasts are good for listening, and I can repeat them as many times as I like until I understand (Melanie, 2022 focus group discussions).

Before being exposed to both multimedia digital files, I used to think podcasts were the best, as I was used to listening to a lot of radio podcasts, but since both were used in the ENG101 module, I am now in favour of vodcast; it's like you are in an actual virtual class with your lecturers (Lentswe, 2022 focus group discussions).

To be frank, vodcasts provide great guidelines because lecturers demonstrate what they are addressing in detail. With podcasts, I sort of have to imagine what they are talking about (Mphahlele, 2022 focus group discussions).

I love vodcasts more. It is easy to follow the discussed subject matter because you can see what is being discussed. I must say that some topics require students to see them. Vodcasts are extremely helpful with regards to assignments (Noel, 2022 focus group discussions).

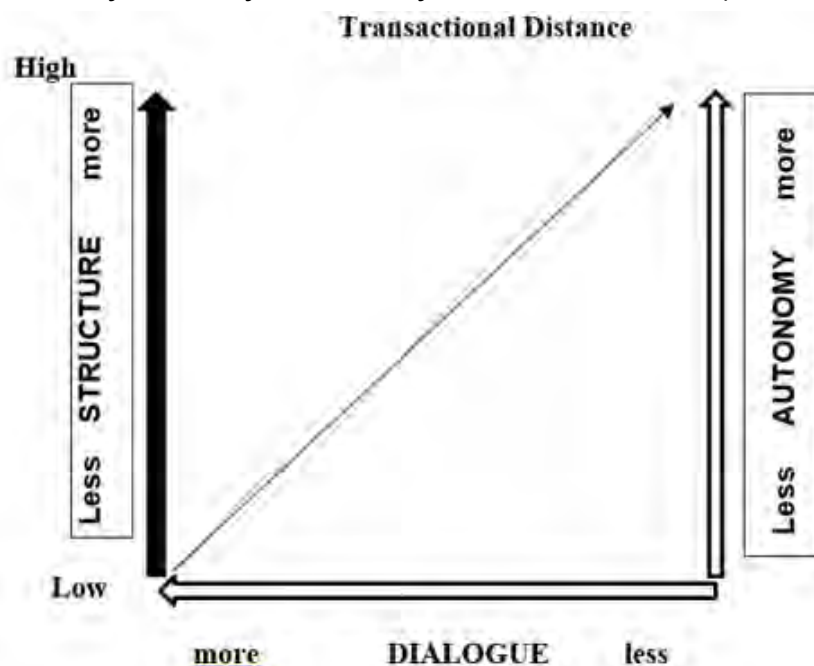
The verbatim statements above demonstrate the students' responses garnered from a focus group discussion. Students revealed that they prefer vodcasts because the visual element inherent in vodcasts, wherein demonstrations of discussed content are made accessible, contributes to an enhanced capacity to diligently pursue the subject matter with precision. Additionally, the immersive nature of the vodcast format lends a semblance of participation within a simulated classroom environment, further inciting motivation, cultivating interest, and igniting a passionate engagement with the subject matter. Vodcasts not only offer pertinent guidelines but also proffer realistic and thought-provoking examples that augment comprehension. Their ease of comprehension is a noteworthy attribute, promoting accessibility for a diverse cohort of students (Timothy, Melanie, Lentswe, Mphahlele, Noel 2022 focus group discussions). A particular student, Lentswe, has articulated a shift in preference from podcasts to vodcasts due to their enhanced comprehensibility, particularly within the context of the ENG101 module. The collective sentiment within the ENG101 cohort echoes this preference for vodcasts, underpinned by their facilitation of seamless comprehension and engagement.

Based on the findings presented above, the effectiveness of vodcasts in offering a quasi-face-to-face simulation plays an integral role in enhancing the academic writing skills of first-year students. This finding aligns with studies by Doi, Lucky, and Rubin (2022), Kenna (2022), and Prodggers, Travis, and Pownall (2023), which highlight that vodcasts provide distinctive viewpoints, enabling students to perceive skills from the perspective of their lecturers, ultimately enhancing their academic performance (Kyaw et al., 2019; Radianti et al., 2020). In addition, the adoption of vodcasts has proven instrumental in honing academic writing skills, rendering them an invaluable tool for teaching in distance education institutions. Vodcasts also serve as supplementary aids that bridge the isolation gap, which is particularly pertinent in the context of the ENG101 module offered within an ODeL university. Given the occasional challenges associated with accessing online learning platforms, vodcasts provide a sense of connection and community for remote students who cannot attend in-person sessions.

Figure 1 visually represents the reduction in transactional distance, showcasing how vodcasts play a crucial role in supplying students with information, particularly in situations where challenges arise in accessing online learning platforms.

**Figure 1.**

*Illustration of Moore's framework of transaction distance (Sevnarayan, 2022)*



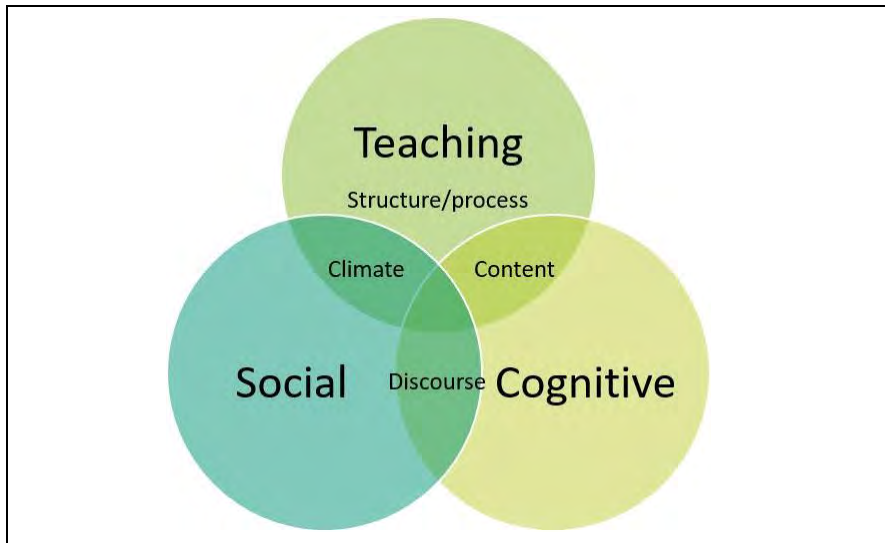
This integration of vodcasts as supplementary tools has reduced the transactional distance, a concept elaborated upon by Moore (1973), as it has been associated with significant benefits for students. Additionally, it has encouraged the development of a 'community of practice' echoing Garrison et al.'s (2000) discussions by developing meaningful social interactions between students and lecturers in online spaces and enhancing the overall effectiveness of the online environment.

Figure 2 depicts the community of practice, enhancing online learning with vodcasts in ENG101 through strategies promoting social, cognitive, and teaching presence.

The merits of vodcasts are multifaceted: they offer flexibility by allowing content consumption at the viewer's convenience, encourage reflection, create a sense of social presence for students and lecturers, boost motivation, and cater to the needs of visual learners. According to Faramarzi et al. (2020), Mohale (2023), Sevnarayan and Mohale (2022), and Javier (2021), vodcasts provide captivating and enlightening content to remote learners, effectively bridging the instructional gap between students and lecturers. As evidenced by Cook et al. (2010), Lee (2020), and Veletsianos and Houlden (2020), it is essential to consider the stance of Strielkowski et al. (2020), who argue that certain students might harbour technological apprehensions and not be ready for online education. However, the outcomes derived from the online open-ended evaluation question refute this contention. Students expressed a preference for vodcasts as a supplementary multimedia digital tool, did not indicate technophobic tendencies, and found the implementation of vodcasts beneficial.

**Figure 2.**

Col framework (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 88)

***Guidelines for the creation of vodcasts in an ODeL context***

The findings presented in this article served as a foundation for the development of comprehensive guidelines tailored specifically to creating high-quality vodcasts within the ODeL context. As vodcasts have garnered significant preference among students and offer a quasi-face-to-face virtual emulation, these guidelines have been developed to enlighten both current and future lecturers about the intricacies involved in producing high-quality supplementary tools enriched with practical skills. Importantly, these guidelines stand to substantially benefit ENG101 first-year students. The incorporation of vodcasts holds the potential to elevate academic writing skills, diminish transactional distance, and create an engaging educational experience for the digitally adept cohort of first-year students. It is important to point out that the adoption of vodcasts has proven instrumental in enhancing academic writing skills, as they provide a sense of face-to-face interaction and create a sense of connection and community for remote students who cannot attend in-person sessions. Amongst many, some key guidelines include using clear and audible voice projection in vodcasts (Timothy, Melanie, Lentswe, Mphahlele, Noel 2022 focus group discussions). Table 2 represents concise guidelines and processes for the creation of high-quality vodcasts.

Table 2 (see appendix).

These all-encompassing guidelines aid lecturers in creating impactful vodcasts that enhance academic writing skills for first-year students in an ODeL context. These encompass clear language, a neutral tone, explicit introductions, assignment relevance, specific examples, and pre-publishing excitement. Strict adherence ensures top-quality vodcasts for effective teaching.

## CONCLUSION

This article sheds light on a compelling trend among first-year students: a pronounced preference for vodcasts over podcasts. This preference may be attributed to the unique advantage vodcasts bring, allowing students to gain insights into academic writing from the perspective of their lecturers. Vodcasts, by their very nature, excel at strengthening the academic writing skills of first-year students due to their capacity to simulate a quasi-face-to-face learning experience. Given the context of the ENG101 module's delivery within an ODeL institution, the integration of six comprehensive guidelines detailing the creation of high-quality vodcasts aimed at enhancing academic writing skills is a significant stride. These guidelines stand as a strategic resource, enabling lecturers to harness the power of students' predilection for vodcasts. The preference for vodcasts suggests that visual and auditory elements combined can significantly enhance the learning experience for first-year students. In addition, vodcasts' ability to simulate a quasi-face-to-face interaction provides a unique advantage in teaching academic writing. This implies that educational institutions should consider integrating vodcasts into their curriculum to improve students' writing skills effectively. The compelling nature of vodcasts suggests that they can significantly boost student engagement and motivation. This indicates that students are more likely to stay engaged and motivated when the content is delivered through vodcasts. Educational institutions, especially those using ODeL models, should integrate vodcasts into their curricula. This can be done by supplementing traditional course materials with vodcasts to provide a more immersive learning experience. By incorporating vodcasts as supplementary tools, lecturers can effectively construct a robust educational foundation that amplifies the academic writing skills of first-year students. A key noteworthy facet is that vodcasts emerged as a medium that bridged the gap between virtual interaction and in-person instruction, creating a quasi-face-to-face assimilation that is not only enthralling but also profoundly sparks students' intellectual curiosity. While vodcasts offer unique learning advantages for audio-visual learners, this study found that podcasts were less preferred. However, this preference may not hold true for students in other ODeL institutions, where different learning styles and preferences might lead to a greater appreciation of podcasts. Even though vodcasts provide unique learning advantages for audio-visual students, for this study, podcasts were less preferred, and that may not be the reality for some students in other ODeL institutions.

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## Appendix

**Table 2.**

*Summary of Guidelines for the Creation of Vodcasts (Mohale, 2023, p. 218).*

Guideline's descriptive themes	Checklist
<p><b><u>1. Ensure vodcasts align with assignment topics:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Address assignment-specific areas and key ideas.</li> <li>▪ Clarify instructions' meanings and correctness criteria.</li> <li>▪ Eliminate redundancy and irrelevance.</li> <li>▪ Cover academic writing aspects extensively.</li> </ul>	Yes/No
<p><b><u>2. Isolate distinct topics, unless interconnected:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Identify challenging topics and reasons.</li> <li>▪ Collect relevant data on the chosen subject.</li> <li>▪ Maintain a singular topic focus.</li> <li>▪ Ensure a coherent and organised presentation.</li> <li>▪ For episodic content, introduce episode's scope in the initial 20 seconds.</li> <li>▪ Preview the upcoming episode topic at each segment's end.</li> <li>▪ Sequentially number episodes (e.g., '1 of 5', '3 of 5') in vodcasts.</li> </ul>	
<p><b><u>3. Create vodcasts for simplified module content:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Explore diverse simplification approaches.</li> <li>▪ Identify and dissect key concepts.</li> <li>▪ Explain and clarify these components comprehensively.</li> <li>▪ Offer step-by-step task guides.</li> <li>▪ Prioritise the module's core details, ideas, and concepts.</li> <li>▪ Integrate practical examples.</li> <li>▪ Employ clear language for complex terms.</li> <li>▪ Trim lengthy sentences. Simplify glossary explanations.</li> <li>▪ Enhance understanding with relevant visuals.</li> </ul>	
<p><b><u>4. Be clear and avoid implicit connotations:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Clearly state the presentation objectives.</li> <li>▪ Convey concepts unambiguously.</li> <li>▪ Identify potential assumptions or inferences.</li> <li>▪ Enhance clarity with relevant infographics.</li> <li>▪ Reinforce key points for understanding.</li> </ul>	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Utilise simplified English for language awareness, aiding EAL and ESL students.</li> </ul>	
<p><b><u>5. For easy understanding, create vodcasts with context-specific examples:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Develop a lesson plan with relevant examples to aid comprehension and retention.</li> <li>▪ Ensure alignment with subject matter and learning goals.</li> <li>▪ Use examples to clarify complex ideas, encourage critical thinking, and relate to real-life scenarios.</li> <li>▪ Enhance academic writing skills with memorable, applicable examples.</li> <li>▪ Ensure relatability and clarity for first-year students, promoting connection to subject matter.</li> </ul>	
<p><b><u>6. Speak in a composed, neutral tone:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Engage with a clear, audible voice.</li> <li>▪ Ensure that the pace is conducive to student comprehension.</li> <li>▪ Employ strategic pauses for clarity.</li> <li>▪ Review the vocal delivery in your content.</li> <li>▪ Consider background music for student engagement.</li> </ul>	