

Transforming workplace English in distance education: Exploring e-learning preferences and experiences in the digital age

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ABSTRACT

In transforming digital progression in professional contexts, effective communication and career growth hinge significantly on mastering workplace English. Despite the increasing reliance on e-learning tools as a promising alternative in higher education, there exists a dearth of research focusing on individual preferences and experiences, particularly within distance education. This article fills this gap by conducting qualitative research firmly rooted in the community of inquiry theory. The primary objective of this study is to scrutinize the efficacy of e-learning tools and highlight factors that influence the preferences of first-year students engaged in distance education. Some key considerations encompass flexibility, interactivity, personalized learning, and accessibility. The research methodology involves observation of various e-learning platforms, in-depth interviews, and open-ended evaluation questions with first-year students who speak English as a second language in a South African open-distance e-learning university. The findings highlight an inclination towards virtual classrooms and customized online modules. Noteworthy aspects highlighted by participants include the significance of collaborative learning, real-world scenarios, continuous feedback mechanisms, and the integration of adaptive technologies. The significance of this research lies in its contribution to the advancement of distance education, which specifically focuses on workplace English skills. This research expands on distance education and provides specific implications for enhancing e-learning practices and their pivotal role in guiding the future workforce.

Keywords: digital age; distance education; e-learning; learning management system; ODeL; workplace English

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INTRODUCTION

Studies indicate that digitalisation simplifies communication and overcomes language barriers (Aliyeva, 2023; Gumbo, 2023; Lifintsev & Wellbrock, 2019; Moldagali et al., 2022; Ortiz, 2022). As traditional language learning methods face challenges (Elfaki et al., 2019; El Khairat, 2021), there is a need to explore students' preferences and experiences in utilising e-learning tools (Sevnarayan, 2022),

particularly in distance education (DE) contexts (Hargitai et al., 2021). The recent surge in e-learning adoption (Megahed & Ghoneim, 2022), further accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic (Nikou & Maslov, 2023), has transformed education into a more adaptable and accessible form (Ahmad et al., 2022). This shift emphasises the urgency of research to explore the potential of e-learning tools in DE. It is interesting to note that there is limited research available on students' preferences and experiences in utilising e-learning tools specifically for workplace English learning, particularly within the context of DE (El Khairat, 2021; Hargitai et al., 2021).

E-learning tools in higher education institutions (HEIs) (Lynch, 2020; Sevnarayan, 2022) are flexible and enable self-paced learning which is crucial for busy work schedules. These tools often include multimedia which enhances engagement, and adaptation to individual learning speeds. Platforms like learning management systems (LMSs) (Sevnarayan et al., 2023), Zoom (Sey & Em, 2023), Microsoft Teams, and social media [Telegram] (Sevnarayan, 2023a; Sevnarayan, 2023b) integrate into workplace communication and align with workplace English skills development. Despite the recognition of the increased importance of workplace English skills and the potential of e-learning tools (Chen, 2021; Enock, 2023; Vannasy & Sengsouliya, 2023), the study demonstrates the need to explore factors that influence student preferences. Existing literature lacks information on these tools in DE contexts (Jung, 2019) and leaves a significant gap. Preferences may hinge on technological competence, learning style, and the perceived effectiveness of e-learning platforms.

This study investigates first-year students' e-learning tool preferences for workplace English. It is significant due to the rising importance of workplace English skills in the digital age and the transformative potential of e-learning tools in language programs. This article uses empirical methods which aim to identify challenges, develop strategies, and enhance e-learning program design for workplace English competence in DE. The article poses critical questions in this context:

1. What e-learning tools are most preferred by students for workplace English learning in the digital age?
2. What factors significantly shape students' preferences for specific e-learning tools within the workplace English learning context?
3. How do e-learning tools influence the transformation of workplace English, with potential impact on communication, career advancement, and professional growth?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Factors influencing students' e-learning tool preferences for workplace English

There is a diverse perspective on the integration of technology in education that focuses on e-learning across different cultural and educational contexts. The studies discussed below highlight positive attitudes toward technology in education and demonstrate its potential benefits. Cao (2022) and Wang and Hsu (2020) explored mobile-assisted learning preferences and note a positive reception of technology in education. Cao (2022) highlighted inquiry learning's positive impact on problem-solving skills among Chinese HE students, and urge deeper exploration of attitudes and instructional approaches. In contrast, Wang and Hsu (2020) revealed Taiwanese engineering students' readiness to use mobile applications for learning Business English (BE) which prompts the need for South African research to fill knowledge gaps. Similarly, Latip et al. (2022) studied e-learning acceptance in a Malaysian HE institution and identified four significant factors influencing acceptance, with self-efficacy crucial for connecting performance expectancy and social influence. Furthermore, Alariqi et al. (2019) assessed e-learning effectiveness in Afghan HE which highlighted barriers in providing guidance for improvement. Moreover, Nortvig et al. (2018) explored factors affecting e-learning and blended learning in Denmark and noted the complexity of teaching and learning beyond format comparisons.

El-Masri and Tarhini (2017) investigated e-learning adoption among university students in Qatar and the USA and revealed factors influencing behavioural intention based on Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT). The research impacts the multi-dimensional nature of factors that affect e-learning adoption which include behavioural, individual, social, and cultural

elements (El-Masri & Tarhini, 2017). It highlights the global growth of e-learning in developing countries and note a lack of research on challenges faced by educational institutions in these regions (El-Masri & Tarhini, 2017). The study identifies a crucial gap which called for a comparative analysis between factors influencing e-learning adoption in developing and developed countries (El-Masri & Tarhini, 2017). Similarly, in South Africa, Joaquim et al. (2022) and Mpungose (2023) mentioned challenges and uncertainties in the shift to online learning and emphasised technical limitations and the need for improvement. Conversely, Ebrahim and Van Den Berg (2022) focused on pandemic-induced e-learning challenges that revolved around issues of motivation and engagement, heightened by the Covid-19 pandemic. They suggest that gamified quizzes enhance motivation. They noted challenges in the South African HEI context which include difficulties in introducing e-learning due to infrastructure challenges and resistance from student bodies amid lockdown measures. It includes a struggle to engage online due to personal circumstances and socio-economic factors (Ebrahim & Van Den Berg, 2022). E-learning is further hindered by high dropout rates, lack of engagement, and the isolated nature of online learning compared to traditional classrooms (Ebrahim & Van Den Berg, 2022). Challenges extend to digital literacy, infrastructure issues, and connectivity problems and are based in developing contexts (Ebrahim & Van Den Berg, 2022). Despite extensive studies in various countries, there is a scarcity of research on e-learning in South Africa. This study aims to fill this gap by context-specific investigations into the unique challenges and dynamics of e-learning in South African HEIs.

Given the outlined evidence which point towards the positive reception and readiness for technology-enhanced education across various cultural and educational contexts (Alariqi et al., 2019; Cao, 2022; Ebrahim & Van Den Berg, 2022; Latip et al., 2022; Wang & Hsu, 2020) there is a need to probe further into the area of workplace English. The readiness of students globally to utilise mobile applications for learning Business English, not only highlights the global trend towards the integration of technology in learning languages but also signals the necessity for specific investigations into workplace English. This becomes particularly crucial in contexts like South Africa, where research is scant, pointing to a significant knowledge gap. Exploring workplace English within the framework of technology-assisted learning could reveal insights into the unique needs, challenges, and preferences of professionals in diverse sectors and thereby encourage more effective, tailored learning interventions. Therefore, an investigation into workplace English through technology-enhanced learning models could significantly optimise educational strategies and outcomes to ensure that students are not only linguistically prepared but culturally and contextually equipped to thrive in the global market.

Implications for communication, career advancement, and professional growth

Shahzad et al. (2023) bring attention to e-learning's role in university librarian professional development. Shahzad et al. (2023) proposes a framework aligned with PRISMA guidelines. Questions arise about the generalisability of the results and potential biases while the research highlights the significance of their findings. This reveals the need for researchers and lecturers to approach technology integration cautiously. There further needs to be a recognition of the importance of context-specific considerations. Likewise, Stine et al. (2019) contribute to the report on AI integration in business education. Their findings reveal the importance of critical inquiry into ethical considerations that surrounds technology adoption. This prompts a thoughtful reflection on the balance between technical skill development and the encouragement of ethical decision-making in students. This emphasises the broader societal implications of integrating advanced technologies in education. These studies present a clear view of technology's transformative potential in education. However, the argument calls for further research that provides specific foci and contexts. This acknowledges the complexities of technology's role. Technology guides that adaptation of education. Thus, a clear understanding with ethical considerations is essential to develop its benefits while limiting potential challenges and disparities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by Garrison et al.'s (1999) framework known as the Community of Inquiry (CoI). The CoI framework encompasses several key elements which include cognitive presence, social presence, teaching presence, and the overarching influence of student presence. This is demonstrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

Community of inquiry theory (Garrison et al., 2010, p.6).



The CoI serves as the foundation for our in-depth examination of the transformation of workplace English in DE and the exploration of e-learning preferences and experiences in the digital age. At the heart of effective teaching is 'cognitive presence,' which refers to the intellectual stimulation and depth of learning experienced by students. The examination of the transformation of workplace English, through the exploration of e-learning preferences and experiences, provides opportunities to create immersive learning experiences that promote critical thinking through activities like problem-solving tasks, case analyses, and collaborative projects (Garrison et al., 1999; Garrison et al., 2010). This interaction within a virtual environment supports cognitive presence, going beyond the limitations of traditional classroom settings. Establishing a 'social presence' is crucial for building an engaged learning community. E-learning platforms offer features such as discussion forums, video conferencing, chat functionalities, and provide a platform where students can genuinely connect, collaborate, and share insights. Through these means, lecturers can facilitate meaningful peer interactions, idea exchange, and collective problem-solving. This engagement enhances 'teaching presence,' ensuring tailored instruction. 'Learner presence' exerts a transformative influence and represents students' self-efficacy, including their cognitive, behavioural, and motivational aspects, which contribute to their ability to self-regulate in online learning (Shea & Bidjerano, 2010). The understanding and usage of these four presences facilitate and enhance the exploration and preferences of e-learning tools in the digital age. The aim is not only to redefine pedagogy in workplace English but also to empower lecturers in HEIs to prepare both lecturers and students for the challenges and opportunities presented in the digitalisation of curriculum.

METHOD

Research context

This study is situated at the South African ODeL institution, ‘UODL’, one of Africa’s largest distance education universities with approximately 400,000 annual registrations (Letseka et al., 2018). UODL’s student body is diverse which spans financial, linguistic, and social backgrounds, includes ages ranging from 18 to 70, and represent various ethnic groups (Maphoto, 2022; Ward-Cox, 2020). The research centres on ENG1453 students at UODL who are English Second Language (ESL) speakers. The students face many challenges in mastering the module. The student proficiency level is defined by English being their second language. The study gains significance by acknowledging hurdles like internet connectivity issues, reliance on mobile phones or local internet cafes, and language barriers (Ngubane-Mokiwa & Letseka, 2015; Ward-Cox, 2020). Understanding these challenges is critical for tailoring e-learning strategies in this unique context, with potential implications for institutions worldwide grappling with diverse student bodies and digital connectivity problems. Many students in rural areas do not have mobile phones. They borrow phones and pay for access to devices at local internet cafes to complete their assignments.

Research approach and design

Qualitative research, characterised by its iterative nature, is chosen for an in-depth case study, and aims to comprehensively explore e-learning experiences in a South African ODeL university (Patton, 2002), in alignment with the CoI theory (Garrison et al., 2010). This explorative methodology is preferred over quantitative research due to its ability to capture contextual information essential for understanding subjective experiences in the context of e-learning (Sukamolson, 2007). Qualitative methods, including e-mail interviews (Bampton & Cowton, 2002) and open-ended evaluations (Asiamah et al., 2017; Reja et al., 2003), are well-suited to gather rich data (Tasker & Cisneroz, 2019) and facilitates a holistic examination of e-learning strategies’ integration and their influence (Bampton & Cowton, 2002) on workplace English competence. This approach aligns with the interpretive paradigm and provides a comprehensive understanding of participants’ perspectives on e-learning in the digital age (Heale & Twycross, 2018; Patton, 2002). Furthermore, a case study is suitable for this research as it offers an in-depth exploration of the specific context at UODL to comprehensively understand e-learning tools in the context of workplace English learning (Heale & Twycross, 2018). The research questions aim to identify preferred e-learning tools, understand factors influencing students’ preferences, and examine the impact of these tools on workplace English transformation (Heale & Twycross, 2018). A case study allows for a detailed analysis of UODL’s unique challenges and opportunities and provides rich qualitative insights into e-learning strategies, student experiences, and outcomes related to communication, career advancement, and professional growth (Heale & Twycross, 2018).

Population and sampling

In research and statistics, ‘population’ denotes a group with common traits for study (Campbell et al., 2020). Purposive sampling was used (Creswell & Poth, 2017) and 50 students were chosen from a population of approximately 10,000, which adheres to qualitative research guidelines (Guest, 2015). Purposive sampling allows for the intentional selection of participants who possess specific characteristics or experiences relevant to the research objectives. In this case, it enables a focused and in-depth exploration of the chosen students’ perspectives, and this enhances the richness and depth of qualitative experiences and maintain feasibility within the context of a large population. This study investigated LMS usage, including forum engagement, interactions, and accessibility, and addresses the first research question. For the second question, findings were obtained through one-on-one e-mail interviews with all four ENG1453 lecturers, which is the entire lecturer population. This approach ensures a thorough understanding of perspectives and experiences and enables a comprehensive analysis of the subject matter. The third question utilised a purposive sample of 50

participants from an online discussion forum evaluation (Asiamah et al., 2017; Campbell et al., 2020; Petty et al., 2012; Tasker & Cisneroz, 2019). Specifically, the ENG1453 first-year students were targeted through purposive sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2017). This was essential to understand the impact of e-learning on workplace English communication and professional growth. Data collection for findings employed random sampling which ensured inclusivity (Etikan & Bala, 2017).

Research instruments

This study employed three research tools: an observation schedule (Swan, 1993), e-mail interviews (Bampton & Cowton, 2002), and open-ended evaluation questions (Asiamah et al., 2017; Reja et al., 2003; Tasker & Cisneroz, 2019). The observation schedule enabled the researchers to understand e-learning strategy implementation in classrooms, address limitations of evaluation questions or interviews (Petty et al., 2012; Swan, 1993) and enabled an evaluation of students' tool preferences. E-mail interviews (Bampton & Cowton, 2002) allowed asynchronous communication with lecturers to gather information on technical reliability, multimedia, engagement, communication, and collaboration. Open-ended evaluation questions (Tasker & Cisneroz, 2019), which captured qualitative data on tools to enhance career growth, communication, improvement suggestions, were posted on the Online Discussion Forum (ODFs). Challenges were mitigated through structured schedules and trained observers (Petty et al., 2012) and aligned with the study's objective of exploring e-learning strategies for workplace English competence.

Data collection and analysis

An announcement was distributed which instructed student participants to sign consent forms before accessing the evaluation questions on Moodle LMS. Thematic analysis of open-ended evaluation questions (Vaismoradi et al., 2013) revealed recurring patterns which shape workplace English competence (Mallia, 2014). Data collection took place over two months in the first semester of 2023 which involved an observation schedule conducted over two months (Swan, 1993), e-mail interviews over a week (Bampton & Cowton, 2002), and open-ended evaluation questions which spanned one month (Asiamah et al., 2017; Reja et al., 2003; Tasker & Cisneroz, 2019). These methods aimed to investigate e-learning's potential on workplace English and student preferences to provide in-depth findings. The analysis drew patterns from open-ended evaluation questions, e-mail interviews, and observational schedules through deductive and inductive approaches. The study was implemented over two months which allowed the researchers to gather in-depth findings on e-learning's impact on workplace English and student preferences. To further ensure the reliability and validity of the data analysis process, inter-rater reliability checks were conducted periodically among researchers involved in thematic analysis and enhances the rigour of the findings.

LIMITATIONS

Despite the comprehensive approach taken in this study, certain limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the research is confined to a specific context and therefore the findings may not be entirely generalisable to other HEIs. The unique characteristics of UODL, such as its large student body and diverse demographics, may influence the applicability of the results to institutions with different profiles. Secondly, the study focused specifically on ENG1453 students at UODL who are ESL speakers which limit the transferability of findings to students with different language backgrounds or proficiency levels. The challenges faced by ESL students, such as language barriers and reliance on alternative internet access, may not fully represent the experiences of students with different linguistic backgrounds. Furthermore, the use of qualitative research methods, while suitable for capturing details and contextual information, limits the ability to draw broad quantitative conclusions. However, the findings are based on a purposive sample of 50 first-year students and provide a diversity of experiences within the broader student population at UODL.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The researchers followed ethical protocols and ensured that every participant voluntarily signed consent forms before they engaged in the study to ensure their voluntary participation. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained during data collection, analysis, and reporting. Permission to collect data was granted by the Research Ethics Committee. The name of the university, the module and students have all been given pseudonyms to protect the identities of all participants and the institution.

FINDINGS

RQ1: Students’ preferred e-learning tools for workplace English learning in the digital age

To address the first research question, the researchers observed the Moodle LMS to understand students’ preferred use of e-learning tools to enhance workplace English at the university under study. The analysis of logs and statistics from the ENG1453 module on Moodle LMS provides insights into the e-learning tools preferred and utilised by students. These statistics, as presented in [Figure 2](#) and [Table 1](#) below, offer a glimpse into the patterns of engagement within the module and can inform instructional design and strategies for improving the learning experience.

Figure 2

Most viewed e-learning tools

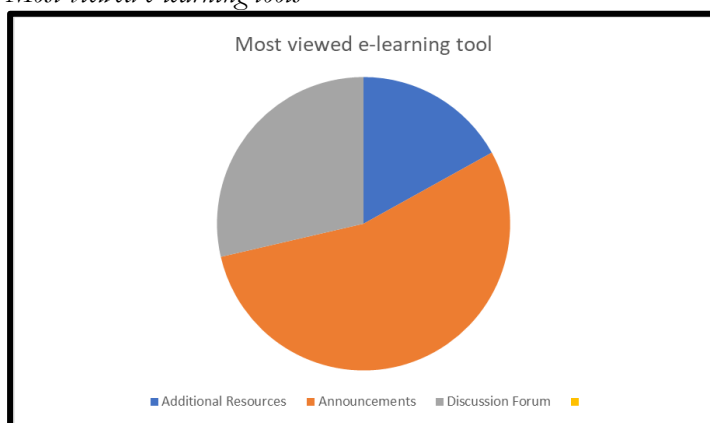


Table 1

Most viewed e-learning tools

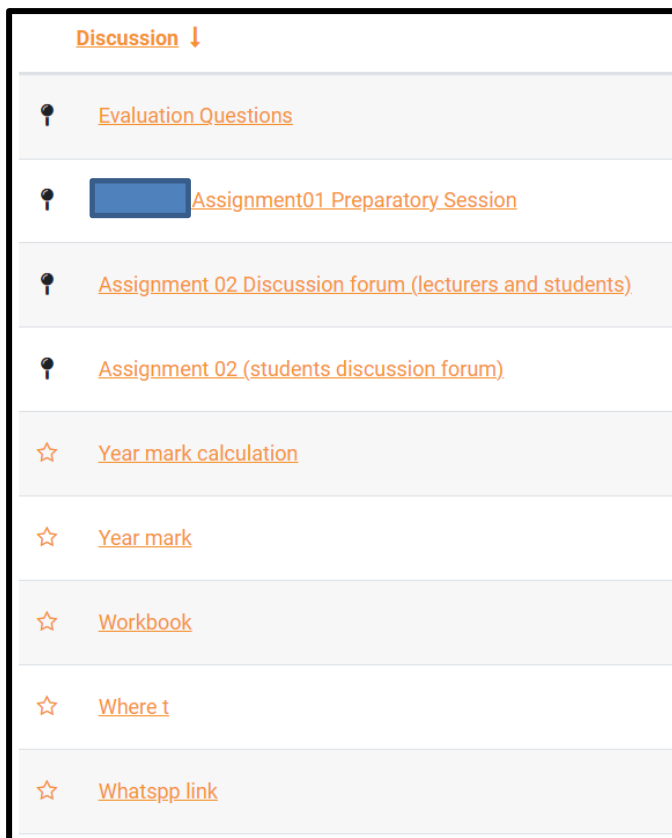
ENG1453 Semester 1	Additional Resources	Announcements	Discussion Forum
Student Views	14 492 views	46 530 views	24 480 views

Theme 1: The announcement tool as the most accessed

Figure 2 reveals that the announcement tool stands out as the most accessed e-learning feature which has amassed a substantial total of 46,530 views. This observation suggests that students highly value communication and updates from their lecturers. Announcements serve as a crucial means of disseminating important information, such as module updates, deadlines, links to video recordings, feedback links, and other critical notifications, as shown in [Figure 3](#) below.

Figure 3

Announcement tool as the most viewed e-learning tool



Student engagement, through timely and relevant announcements, is crucial for e-learning. Figure 3 illustrates the multifaceted role of the announcement tool and integrates diverse resources for enhanced accessibility and flexibility. This integration facilitates timely feedback and reminders which improves the student experience. The announcement tool also serves as a navigation aid that simplifies the user experience by consolidating essential information and resources. However, its use for administrative tasks related to assignments and exams limits its potential. The tool lacks broader support and professional development components, such as student support sessions and opportunities for enhanced communication and collaboration.

Theme 2: Online discussion forum serving various purposes

The observation of the ODF on the Moodle LMS platform draws attention with 24,480 views. Figure 4 below highlights the importance of supporting a sense of community and interaction among online students. ODFs serve as pivotal tools for promoting peer-to-peer learning, critical thinking, and idea exchange. To boost participation, lecturers can create engaging discussion topics, provide clear participation guidelines, and actively moderate discussions to ensure meaningful interactions.

Figure 4*The discussion forum as the second most viewed e-learning tool*

Discussion ↓	Started by	Last post	Replies
📌 Evaluation Questions			440
📌 ENN1504 Assignment01 Preparatory Session			53
📌 Assignment 02 Discussion forum (lecturers and students)			82
📌 Assignment 02 (students discussion forum)			62
☆ Year mark calculation			0
☆ Year mark			0
☆ Workbook			2
☆ Where t			1
☆ Whatspp link			16

The ODF, as depicted in Figure 4 above, emerges as a versatile element within the e-learning environment which facilitates various functions. It connects students, lecturers, and resources and establishes a dynamic space for collaborative learning and effective communication. Notably, it supports peer interaction by providing links to WhatsApp groups and enhances the learning experience. In contrast, the observation of the discussion forums reveals a different scenario. While the evaluation forum garners the most posts, and assignment discussions follow, there is concern about the limited scope of engagement, mainly focused on assignments and examinations. Given a student population of 10,000, this low participation rate raises questions about potential barriers to engagement. The forums appear to be utilised primarily for transactional purposes and miss opportunities for broader academic discourse and peer knowledge sharing.

Theme 3: Additional resources providing supporting supplementary material

The substantial engagement with the additional resources tool in Figure 5 below, as indicated by its 14,492 views, reflects a clear and significant trend among students in their quest for supplementary materials to augment their learning experience.

Figure 5

Additional resources providing supporting material

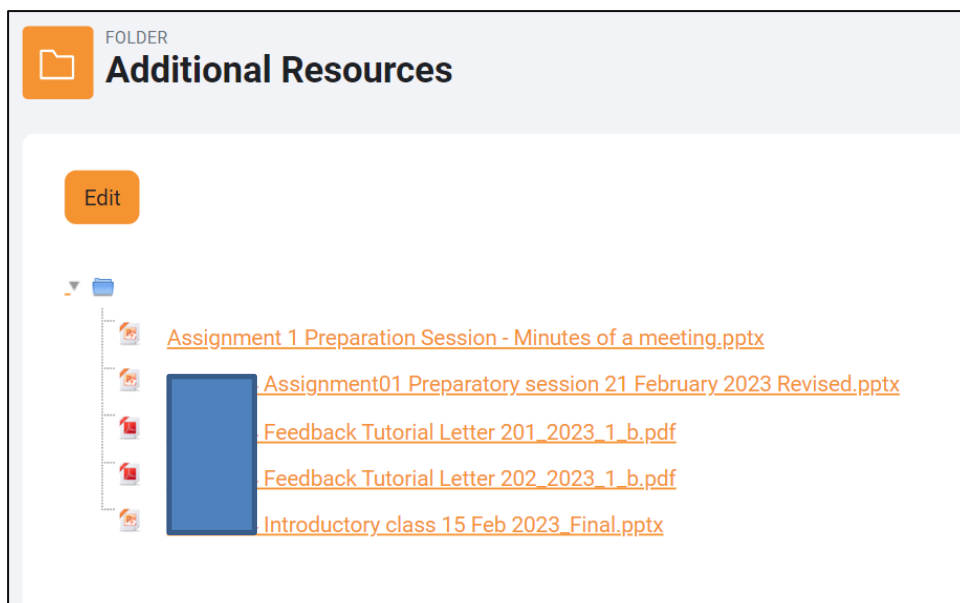


Figure 5 exposes the inadequacy of resources for ENG1453 students in preparing for the digital age and reveals a stark need to address the demand for enrichment materials. While current resources such as tutorial letters, PowerPoint presentations, and video lessons are acknowledged, their narrow focus on the core curriculum overlooks opportunities to deepen comprehension and engagement. The fact that students actively engage with additional resources highlights a proactive learning approach and a hunger for supplementary materials.

RQ2: Factors that influence students' preferences for specific e-learning tools in the context of workplace English learning

To address the second research question, three themes emerged from the factors influencing student preferences for specific e-learning tools in workplace English learning: technical reliability as a significant factor, student engagement with multimedia, and the importance of collaboration and community in their e-learning experiences.

Theme 1: Technical reliability as a significant factor

Both lecturers 2 and 4 have stated that students prefer e-learning tools that provide technical reliability. Students encounter challenges related to system glitches and poor internet access, which can hinder their ability to use e-learning tools effectively. Technical reliability is a significant factor. Lecturer 2 (2023 email interview) states, "Students are sometimes struggling to download or upload assignments and examination question papers on the Moodle platform mostly due to system glitches." Another technical issue that the students experience is that of loadshedding. This affects student productivity with regards to the use of e-learning tools. Lecturer 2 (2023 email interviews) states, "Issues of loadshedding and poor internet access also contributes largely to poor access to all the e-learning tools." This is further supported by Lecturer 4 who states, "Frequent downtime or usability issues can lead to frustration and reduced preference." Loadshedding, as mentioned by Lecturer 2 and Lecturer 4 (2023 email interviews), is a common issue in some areas where electricity supply is unreliable. During loadshedding, students may lose access to their devices and internet connection which makes it impossible to engage with e-learning tools during scheduled study times. It not only

disrupts students' abilities to access module materials but also affects their abilities to meet assignment deadlines and participate in synchronous online sessions.

Theme 2: Multimedia and engagement

Lecturers 3 and 4 provided insights into the positive impact of multimedia elements on student preferences and learning experiences. Students prefer e-learning tools that incorporate multimedia elements like videos, animations, and interactive graphics to enhance engagement and memorability of content. Furthermore, Lecturer 4 (2023 e-mail interviews) states, "The use of multimedia elements such as videos, animations, and interactive graphics can enhance engagement. Students often prefer tools that incorporate multimedia to make the content more engaging and memorable." From this, it is noted that students enjoy the use of multimedia elements, such as video clips, which adds a fun and engaging element to their learning experience. Multimedia appeals to multiple senses and makes the learning experience more dynamic and immersive. In addition, Lecturer 3 (2023 e-mail interviews) states, "Other e-learning tools that are used in the module are video clips to support texts that we would give to our students. They tend to enjoy these as they bring a fun element to learning." When students enjoy the learning experience, as indicated by both lecturers, they are more likely to remember the material. The 'fun' factor associated with multimedia can contribute to better memorability.

Theme 3: Collaboration and community

Both Lecturer 1 and Lecturer 4 emphasise the significance of collaborative tools, and its essentiality to further explore their implications for workplace English. This environment encourages cooperative learning, where students can share ideas, seek clarification, and collaborate on assignments and projects. Students prefer tools like ODFs where they can communicate freely with peers and e-tutors. These platforms provide a space for cooperative learning. Lecturer 1 (2023 e-mail interviews) states,

The other commonly used tool is the discussion forum where students communicate freely amongst themselves and with their e-tutors. Students prefer co-operative learning with their peers because they are unlikely to be judged when their ideas do not match up to the expectations of their peers. Even with e-tutors, there is no formal relationship – and better still, no formal assessments are conducted. Therefore, there is room to test one's ideas in a group and receive immediate feedback. This should boost one's confidence when one realises that they hold ideas and frustrations that are shared by everyone else.

From the above statement, it is deduced that tools that facilitate collaboration with peers and lecturers, such as discussion boards and group projects, are preferred because they create a sense of community and engagement, and lecturers need to use this tool to enhance e-learning. Lecturer 4 (2023 e-mail interviews) further states, "Features like discussion boards, group projects, and live webinars can instil a sense of community and engagement. E-learning tools must be reliable and free from technical glitches." Students often appreciate the opportunity to connect with their classmates and lecturers, even if it is online.

RQ3: The contribution of e-learning to the transformation of workplace English communication, career advancement, and professional growth

To answer the third research question, three themes emerged from the open-ended evaluation questions which were posted on the discussion forum. These were based on the contribution of e-learning to the transformation of workplace English communication, career advancement, and professional growth. Namely that of career advancement, positive impact on communication and suggested improvements to enhance professional growth.

Theme 1: Career advancement

Participants highlight the positive impact of e-learning tools on their career advancement and the untapped potential for e-learning to further support professionalism. They feel that acquiring practical

knowledge and enhancing communication skills boosts their confidence in excelling in professional settings, such as job interviews and networking. Tina (2023 evaluation forum) stated, “The tools impacted my career advancement by bringing light on what would be expected from me and the ability to portray myself professionally in writing and as an individual.” Her statement highlights that these tools impart theoretical knowledge and provide practical insights into the demands of the professional world. There is a compelling case for the expansion of the implementation of e-learning tools to benefit students. This will aid individuals in cultivating a robust sense of professionalism which enhances their written communication skills and contributes to their personal development. This is further supported by Dan’s (2023 evaluation forum) statement, “I’m able to communicate properly with my clients.”

Farah (2023 evaluation forum) further stated that, “The e-learning tool is so convenient as you get to learn everywhere you are and it has improved my communication skills, can engage in crucial tasks and it didn’t only help in academics but in life overall.” Her remark demonstrates the versatility of these tools which enables individuals to learn and participate in educational activities from virtually any location. In this digital age, flexibility is paramount, and module content should be tailored to accommodate anytime, anywhere access. Simon (2023 evaluation forum) further stated that, “The improvement is very pure am very proud and confident to go with my career now.” This comment conveys a sentiment of personal development and heightened self-assurance resulting from the influence of e-learning tools on the individual’s career prospects. The phrase “very pure” employed by the student implies that the enhancement of their skills and knowledge, presumably acquired through their experience with these tools, is authentic and not overstated. This genuine progress has evidently boosted their self-confidence and belief in their professional aptitude which thus necessitates a call for further exploration. Ziya (2023 evaluation forum) stated that,

The impact of e-learning tools on my career advancement has been significant. By acquiring practical knowledge and developing workplace English skills, I feel more confident in my ability to excel in professional settings. Improved communication skills have given me an advantage in job interviews, networking, and overall professional communication.

Ziya’s enhanced confidence in her ability to excel in professional settings suggests that this practical knowledge is highly valuable and directly applicable to her career. It implies that e-learning tools can bridge the gap between academic knowledge and real-world workplace requirements. While the tools implemented on the Moodle LMS are basic, they have impacted students positively and thus paves the way for further exploration of various e-learning tools and their potential to enhance workplace English.

Theme 2: Positive impact on communication

E-learning tools are perceived as positively impacting communication skills. They are viewed as opportunities for the expansion of vocabulary, enhancement of clear communication, and provision of detailed communication. This enhancement of communication proficiency is seen as beneficial in both academic and professional contexts. Diyanah (2023 evaluation forum) gave some insights on what strategies were used to improve communication skills in workplace English. She stated:

The e-learning tools have had a positive impact on my communication skills. Engaging in discussions, group projects, and virtual interactions with peers and instructors has allowed me to practice my written and oral communication skills in a supportive environment. The tools have also provided opportunities for self-expression, collaboration, and feedback, enhancing my communication confidence and proficiency in workplace English.

The lived experiences of students engaging with e-learning tools help us understand that the ODFs provide a collaborative space that encourages communication and can improve workplace

skills. The content on the forums is basic and encourages collaboration only on assignments and exams and requires further development. Siphonotes, “It has impacted very well and positively by giving me the relevant information on how to use it and the communication easy. It finds a way to utilise the new skill set and able to socialise properly.” This helps us understand that students are more confident to communicate in English since the e-learning tools provide a relaxed, and informal platform for students to interact, which provides the potential to bridge the gap in ODeL, if utilised correctly. The Moodle LMS has opened a gateway for collaboration that needs to be explored and developed further. The ease of access to relevant information and the informal nature of these platforms contribute to a relaxed atmosphere that encourages students to communicate confidently in English. This is corroborated by the comments from Lerato and Maya (2023 evaluation forum), who articulated in order, “Our proficiency in utilising website communications has markedly improved,” and “It has had a highly positive impact by furnishing us with pertinent information on its effective utilisation, making communication more straightforward.” Maya’s statement particularly highlights the role of lecturers to impart strategies for effective communication and their need to engage further with students on various workplace skills. Ayyanah, (2023 evaluation forum) on the other hand was enthusiastic about the convenience of e-learning, which provided the potential to hone her communication skills. She stated, “The e-learning tool is so convenient as you get to learn everywhere you are and it has improved my communication skills, I can engage in crucial tasks, and it didn’t only help in academics but in my life.” Ayyanah’s statement highlights the flexibility and value of e-learning tools in improving communication skills across diverse contexts. It suggests the need for exploration in utilising these tools for instructional purposes. E-learning is seen as a versatile platform for skills development and emphasises the importance of communication skills in academic and professional settings.

Theme 3: Suggested improvements to enhance professional growth

Participants provided suggestions for improving the use of e-learning tools. Nate suggested that lecturers provide more information and guidelines to help students understand e-learning better, especially for those new to the format. Nate (2023 evaluation forum) stated that, “They should provide more information to students and guides lines which will make it easier for students to understand more about e-learning because most of us were struggling because this was new to us.” This support can help students use the digital learning environment more effectively and reduce the initial struggles associated with adapting to a new format. Chenesse suggested that they design interactive and engaging activities aligned with real-world workplace scenarios among other elements:

Provide clear instructions and guidance on how to utilise the e-learning tools effectively.
 Design interactive and engaging activities that align with real-world workplace scenarios.
 Incorporate multimedia resources such as videos, audio recordings, and interactive presentations to enhance learning experiences. Offer opportunities for collaborative learning through group projects, peer feedback, and discussion forums. Provide timely feedback and support, addressing students’ questions or concerns related to the e-learning tools. Regularly assess the effectiveness of the e-learning tools and make improvements based on student feedback.

A further suggestion from Chenesse is the incorporation of multimedia resources such as videos, audio recordings, interactive presentations to enhance learning experiences. Chenesse further emphasised the necessity of timely feedback for students. This is supported by Thabo who advised that they could improve the e-learning experience by ensuring that all assignments are marked in a timely manner. Thabo (2023 evaluation forum) stated, “When it comes to their marking system they need to improve because you can’t even make corrections of the things you didn’t do. Writing an exam without even seeing your results where the motivation is or how do you know you have to step up?” Timely feedback not only motivates students but also allows them to identify and rectify their mistakes before crucial assessments, such as exams. This is further supported by Thembi (2023

evaluation forum) who stated, “To please mark the assignments on time so that students can be able to learn and correct their mistakes made on the assignments by not repeating them on the exam.” This statement shows the critical role that timely and constructive feedback plays in the learning process. Feedback serves as a pertinent learning tool for students. However, Joyce’s (2023 evaluation forum) suggestion to improve communication between lecturers and students is essential. She highlighted that:

Lecturers can improve on making use of their own e-learning resources in the same format as students by following the guidelines within the study guide and sticking to it. They can also improve on better communication and working on a solution for marking assignments on time to give appropriate feedback in time for students to work through.

The finding above highlights that students favour interactive, flexible, and accessible platforms, particularly valuing virtual classrooms and modules that are directly relevant to workplace contexts. However, these preferences also demonstrate the need for collaborative learning environments, real-world workplace integration, continuous feedback mechanisms, and adaptive learning technologies to meet individual needs effectively.

DISCUSSION

In response to the first research question, the statistics presented in Figure 2 and Table 1 highlight the central role of communication in online education, consistent with the findings of [El-Masri and Tarhini \(2017\)](#) and [Stine et al. \(2019\)](#). These studies note the importance of effective communication technologies and platforms in HE. However, a critical examination of the announcement tool reveals a potential limitation in its predominant use for basic administrative tasks. This limitation aligns with the literature gap identified by [Jung \(2019\)](#) and emphasises the lack of comprehensive studies on the adoption, preferences, and challenges of e-learning tools in the South African HE context. While it is effective in the dissemination of essential information, the announcement tool falls short in supporting broader aspects of student engagement, professional development, and enhanced communication ([El-Masri & Tarhini, 2017](#)). To address these concerns, a holistic approach is necessary and incorporates features that encourage collaboration, offer professional development opportunities, and align with the multifaceted nature of online learning experiences ([Nortvig et al., 2018](#)). In addition, the CoI framework highlights the importance of social presence in building an engaged learning community. While the announcement tool contributes to social presence by facilitating communication, its predominant use for administrative tasks might limit its potential to promote a sense of community and peer interaction ([Garrison et al., 1999](#)). This limitation highlights the need for an exploration of alternative or complementary tools that can enhance social presence and create more meaningful peer interactions. This aligns with the literature’s emphasis on the importance of collaborative learning and peer-to-peer interactions in online forums ([Cao, 2022; Wang & Hsu, 2020](#)). To address this limitation, lecturers could explore additional platforms or strategies within the CoI framework specifically designed for community building and peer engagement.

In response to the second research question, the findings indicate that students face challenges with technical reliability, resonating with literature on technology-related issues in online education ([El-Masri & Tarhini, 2017; Jung, 2019](#)). Factors such as load shedding and poor internet access emerge as significant hurdles which aligns with studies highlighting the impact of technological barriers on e-learning effectiveness ([Joaquim et al., 2022; Mpungose, 2023](#)). This highlights the need for technological infrastructure and strategies to mitigate the effects of load shedding and ensures uninterrupted access to e-learning tools, in line with the CoI framework’s emphasis on technical reliability ([Garrison et al., 1999](#)). Moreover, students express a preference for multimedia elements which aligns with literature that highlights the positive impact of multimedia on engagement and memorability in e-learning ([Stine et al., 2019; Wang & Hsu, 2020](#)). The findings emphasise the potential of multimedia elements, such as video clips, to enhance the learning experience and improve content retention. However, a multifaceted approach is necessary which considers diverse learning

preferences and ensures multimedia elements align with educational objectives, in accordance with the CoI framework's emphasis on cognitive presence and instructional design (Garrison et al., 2010). Another significant finding emphasises the importance of collaborative tools in facilitating cooperative learning and creates a sense of community, consistent with El-Masri and Tarhini (2017) and Wang and Hsu (2020), who stress the role of peer interaction in online forums. However, concerns arise regarding the limited scope of engagement in discussion forums which stresses the need for strategies to stimulate meaningful participation and broaden the forum's purposes. This corroborates with the emphasis on teaching presence and the role of lecturers in moderating discussions to ensure meaningful interactions.

Data from the third research question reveals the positive impact of e-learning tools on students' professional development. The theme of career advancement corroborates with Garrison et al.'s (1999) CoI framework, which specifically focuses on cognitive presence. Students like Tina and Ziya highlight how e-learning tools enhance practical knowledge and communication skills, boosting confidence in professional settings. This call for exploration aligns with CoI's emphasis on dynamic interaction within a virtual environment which surpasses traditional classroom limitations (Garrison et al., 1999). This argument emphasises the need for a comprehensive approach and extends beyond basic administrative tasks to address broader support and professional development components essential for holistic workplace preparation. In addition, literature and theory support the idea that e-learning tools contribute to enhanced workplace communication. The findings suggest a need for further development of ODFs to encourage more diversified and meaningful academic discourse and moves beyond the current focus on assignments and examinations. The emphasis on collaboration for communication skills resonates with the CoI framework's teaching presence and highlights the need for tailored instruction (Garrison et al., 2000). The recommendations from respondents, such as clear instructions, interactive activities, and multimedia resources, align with the notion of dynamic interaction and cognitive presence. The emphasis on timely assignment marking highlights the critical role of feedback in motivation and improvement which reinforces the need for effective teaching presence. The suggestion to align e-learning strategies between students and lecturers echoes the CoI framework's emphasis on shared responsibility and collaboration within a learning community. The study reveals the significance of communication in online education but identifies a limitation in the predominant use of the announcement tool for basic administrative tasks. Students face technical challenges. This includes the need for enhanced technological infrastructure and exhibit a preference for multimedia elements. E-learning tools positively impact students' professional development and calls for a comprehensive approach beyond administrative tasks. This highlights the importance of diversified and meaningful academic discourse in online forums.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explored preferred e-learning tools for workplace English learning of first year ESL students in a South African ODeL institution. One major finding was that the impact of multimedia elements and collaborative tools on communication skills revealed the importance of pedagogical adaptability. Insights into the contribution of e-learning to career advancement and professional growth showcased the transformative potential of well-designed online modules. These findings call for a proactive approach to embrace the multifaceted nature of e-learning and ensure a dynamic and future-ready online HE context. One of the key limitations lies in the potential narrowness of the focus of the announcement tool which indicates a need for a more diverse set of tools to address diverse aspects of online learning experiences. Moreover, the identification of factors influencing students' preferences highlighted the challenges associated with technical reliability which emphasised the imperative for a robust technological infrastructure. This suggests that advancements in e-learning should be accompanied by parallel developments in technological support to ensure a seamless and effective learning context.

The implications of this research extend beyond the confines of the South African ODeL institution under study and calls for a proactive approach to embrace the transformative power of e-

learning in HE globally. Institutions should diversify e-learning tools by integrating interactive discussion forums and multimedia tools to cater to diverse students' learning preferences. It is important to prioritise technological infrastructure which includes stable internet and information technology support which is essential for a seamless online learning experience. Moreover, ongoing pedagogical training and implementation, personalised support, and continuous evaluation are crucial for maximising the effectiveness of e-learning initiatives which ensures inclusivity and adaptability. Consequently, these recommendations should be implemented with sensitivity to the unique contexts and challenges faced by different educational institutions worldwide. As we embark on this research journey, the broader question emerges: Are we merely adjusting to change, or do we possess the resolve to reshape the trajectory of workplace English education for the future? This study serves as a catalyst for ongoing discourse and action and emphasises the importance of continuous adaptation and innovation in the transformative context of online HE.

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