

Students' perceptions of the inclusion of the English Word Power programme at one university in South Africa



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Background: South Africa has incorporated Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) into many university classrooms in order to help address ubiquitous concerns related to the limited English language proficiency of first-year university students. In the context of this study, the research site used the CALL application called the English Word Power (EWP programme). Research to establish students' perceptions of the CALL application is somewhat limited, although students' perceptions of a learning environment can be more useful in explaining their behaviour. Therefore, teachers' understanding of the students' perceptions towards a new learning programme is likely to assist them in tailoring the content according to the needs of the learners.

Objectives: The objective of this study was to explore the students' perceptions of the use of the EWP, a computer-based programme used for improving English language proficiency. The researchers endeavoured to gain an understanding of the students' perceptions of the strengths and frustrations of the EWP programme. Specifically, the focus was on what the students perceived as their preferred mode of learning and what their views were regarding the contribution of the EWP programme in improving their language skills.

Method: The study was qualitative in nature and a case study design was adopted. A purposive sample of 60 students from an Information and Communication Technology's (ICT) Foundation programme was used to collect data. Focus group interviews were conducted with 60 purposefully selected students and content analysis was used to process data.

Results: The study yielded mixed results, as some students were happy with some of the components of the EWP programme whilst others were frustrated with some components. Specifically, some students reported experiencing frustration with the irrelevant nature of the EWP content. On the contrary, the study revealed that students were satisfied with the EWP programme's accessibility, which facilitated their learning opportunities. Some students reported that their language proficiency concerning spelling and vocabulary had improved. The findings further revealed that the students preferred face-to-face learning to the EWP programme learning environment.

Conclusion: The implication of the findings is that students need a language learning programme that is relevant to their field of study. They also require a programme that allows for student-student and lecturer-student interaction.

Keywords: English Word Power; student-centred instruction; language learning tools; student perception; English language proficiency; Information and Communication Technology.

Introduction

There has been widespread integration of computer technology into language instruction and it is now generally accepted that this integration has had a significant impact on language teaching and learning (Genc & Aydin 2010). Over the past few decades, Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has become an important part of the language learning process. Levy (1997) defines CALL as 'the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning'. Typically, the CALL is used as an umbrella term encompassing the wider use of computer technology in the domain of language learning. Such programmes include, but are not limited to, Rosetta stone, Speed learning languages, Michel Thomas, Stephen Hosking, e-learning software, Chat rooms, Photo system, and so on. Frey, Faul and Yankelov (2003) point out that the use of the CALL programme is revolutionising university teaching and radically changing some faculties' and students' approaches to teaching and learning. In addition, Erguvan (2015) avers

that language teachers find it difficult to maintain student attention and the CALL programme offers new opportunities for supporting teachers to overcome this challenge.

Following international trends, South Africa has included program CALL programme in many university classrooms (Kelly-Laubscher & Van der Merwe 2014). The use of CALL programme for English teaching and learning has been widely viewed to be beneficial (Guo 2012:30; Peeters 2018; Sulaimani, Ahmed Sarhandi & Hussain Buledi 2017:65). However, the findings of the studies conducted yield mixed results. Despite the fact that some studies claim that the use of computer technology facilitates the process of language learning (Erguvan 2015; Kutluca & Gokkurt 2013), other studies indicate that the use of computer technology can, in some cases, impede progress and could result in student frustration (Ambrose & Palpanathon 2017; Heinerichs, Curtis & Gardiner-Shires 2014). Supporting this view, Hubbard (2009) states that the CALL programme is both exciting and frustrating as a field. Based on these contradictions, the researchers felt it appropriate to conduct the current study in the context of one university in South Africa.

The institution where the study was conducted decided to include a self-directed e-learning CALL programme to supplement face-to-face instruction. Therefore, this study was conducted in the context of a module titled English Word Power (EWP programme), Foundation English. This title came about as a result of incorporating the EWP programme in the Foundation English module. The CALL programme used within this module is brand-named the EWP programme and is designed to assist students to gain language skills at their own pace through behaviourist-based drill and practice exercises. The EWP programme is an interactive English e-learning software programme that teaches sentence structure and grammar. It was developed by Needs Development Alignment (NDA) Training Solutions, marketed by EWP Solutions Close Corporation and used by Student Development and Support (SDS) at the research site, to improve the English language proficiency of students. The EWP programme was introduced in response to a common challenge in South Africa where many students entering university are 'underprepared' for the demands of higher education and lack the necessary English language proficiency to succeed at a tertiary level (Boughey 2010:5; Singh 2004:5; Van Rooy & Coetzee-Van Rooy 2015:32).

Schmid et al. (2014) contend that the research that has been conducted so far into the students' use of computers in language learning has focused primarily on the instructors' perceptions.

Supporting this view, Liu, Chen and Chang (2010) argue that limited research has been undertaken that focuses on how the students perceive the inclusion of the CALL programmes in the learning process. Similarly, Belal (2011) states that although students are the ultimate beneficiaries of the CALL programme, their voices have been neglected

in its adoption. Rudduck and Flutter (2000) argue that teachers and researchers need to become sensitive to what pupils can tell them about their experiences, what they think will make a difference to pupils' commitment to learning and, consequently, to their academic progress. It is against this background that this article aims to contribute to an understanding of how students perceive the utility of the EWP programme by exploring the students' perceptions of it in an undergraduate Information and Communication Technology (ICT) language module.

Perception in this study refers to a settled way of thinking, opinion or feeling about something (Cambridge English Dictionary 1995). Many studies reveal that student perceptions are an important determinant of student behaviour (Mustafa, Mahammad Zayed & Islam Sarif 2018; Mutlu & Yidirim 2019). Such studies further indicate that an understanding of the students' perceptions of a learning environment can be more useful in explaining their behaviour than many well-intentioned inferences sometimes made by teachers (Barkhizen 1998; Erguvan 2015; Kutluca & Gokkurt 2013; Tudor, Penlington & McDowell 2010). In addition, Sparrow (2007) is of the view that in order to learn, students take stock of their surroundings. Therefore, what students perceive as being possible to learn in a specific environment is a significant consideration for teachers when they tailor instruction to the needs of the students. Accordingly, the current study sought to answer the following questions:

- What are the students' perceptions of the strengths and limitations of the EWP programme in their English language classrooms?
- What are students' perceptions of the EWP programme as a mode of learning and how do these perceptions compare with those of other modes?
- How do students testify about the contribution of the EWP programme in improving their language skills?

Theoretical framework

Various theoretical models exist to explain the social and psychological motives that affect technology adoption and acceptance. These include the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) on which this study is primarily anchored. This theory was developed by Ajzen (1991) and it posits that attitude towards the behaviour, subject norm and perceived behavioural control influence behavioural intention. According to Ajzen, the first construct of the TPB is behavioural intention, which involves the motivational factors that influence behaviour. The second construct is attitude towards the behaviour, which is the extent to which a person has a favourable or unfavourable appraisal of a given behaviour. Subjective norm is the third construct, which is a social pressure to perform or not to perform a given behaviour. Perceived behavioural control, which refers to people's perceptions of the ease or difficulty of performing the behaviour of interest, also plays a key role in the TPB.

The TPB was chosen for this study, as it is a well-established and robust theoretical model, used as a technology acceptance model in numerous studies and fields. For example, TPB was used by Lai (2017) to explain technology adaptation in educational settings, addressing issues like the perceptions of mobile learning amongst college students. In addition, since the development of this theory, it has been used successfully in various contexts to understand and predict human behaviour. For example, Teo and Lee (2010) argue that the TPB has been proven to be effective in predicting network behaviours and technology use.

Literature review

The English language proficiency of students at institutions of higher learning in South Africa

English is a lingua franca of the 21st century and is spoken by approximately 380 million native speakers and 700 million non-native speakers around the world (Kocaman & Iskender 2016:6125). However, there is significant concern in South Africa regarding the limited English language proficiency of university students (Makoni 2017; Van Rooy & Coetzee-Van Rooy 2015). It is well documented that many students entering South African institutions of higher education are 'underprepared' and lack the necessary English language proficiency to succeed at tertiary level (Boughey 2010:5; Singh 2004:5; Van Rooy & Coetzee-Van Rooy 2015:32). De Wet (2002:119) argues that it is often the educators' own lack of English language proficiency that is the reason for this unpreparedness. A study conducted by De Wet (2002:123) found that teachers believed that 'home language education enhanced teaching and learning'. Because of this, these teachers frequently resorted to code switching to communicate instructional material in a classroom context. They used the students' home language, together with English, in an attempt to enrich the learning experiences. According to De Wet (2002), these two factors are amongst the reasons for the low English language proficiency of many South African university students.

Similarly, Van Rooy and Coetzee-Van Rooy (2015:32) explain that students entering institutions of higher learning have poor English language proficiency, poor reading skills and inadequate comprehension, and these factors make it difficult for them to demonstrate learning achievements. Additionally, South African universities share a common problem that many students are unable to read and write at the expected level (Khumalo & Maphalala 2018).

In order to address issues related to deficiencies in English language proficiency, various mechanisms, such as the Foundation Programmes offered at institutions of higher learning have been put in place (Boughey 2015:5). These Foundation programmes usually focus on subjects like mathematics and English, with a specific focus on academic literacy to address issues related to the underpreparedness of first-year university students (Khumalo & Maphalala

2018). A study conducted by Khumalo and Maphalala (2018) in KwaZulu-Natal indicated that academic literacy modules helped the students to acquire a range of academic literacy skills and assisted them to cope with the demands of higher education. Van Schalwyk (2008) concludes that exposing students to academic literacy modules enables them to gain a deeper understanding of what the university expects of them in terms of writing and reading. In addition, Gee (2000) is of the view that reading and writing are generally accepted to be the core components of literacy and many students need assistance to develop the literacy practices required of them when engaging with material at a tertiary level.

The influence of students' perceptions on the language learning process

In a foreign or second language learning context, various factors influence the learning process, which include, but are not limited to, motivation, attitudes, perceptions, anxiety, learning achievements, aptitudes, intelligence, age and personality (Shams 2008). A significant number of studies have suggested that a student's perception is prominent amongst the factors that influence the learning of a language (Fayeke 2010; Moshabab Asiri 2014; Ushida 2005). According to Mustafa et al. (2015), understanding perceptual factors as well as variables that influence perceptual factors is important. Therefore, perception is considered to be amongst the variables that determine the successful inclusion of computer technology in a second or foreign language learning process.

Donato, Antonek and Tucker (1996) are of the view that constructive learning behaviours are more common amongst students who have a positive perception of the target language. This suggests that these students are more likely to be successful in the language learning process than students with a negative perception. In addition, Ushida (2002) declares that a student's perception of computer-integrated instruction in this case is the most critical determining factor for the successful utilisation of CALL. In support of this assertion, Erguvan (2015) analysed and compared faculty and students' perceptions of a specific web-based instructional tool in a private higher education institute in Kuwait. The findings of the study indicated that instructors were of the opinion that a web-based programme motivated students and added variety to lessons; however, it made instructors question their role in the classroom. Similarly, students enjoyed the programme, although they cited some difficulties regarding the workload, difficult questions and long, boring articles.

As already indicated, various studies reveal that issues pertaining to students' perceptions are often recognised to be one of the more important factors influencing successful language learning endeavours (Fayeke 2010; Moshabab Asiri 2014; Ushida 2005). It is, therefore, unsurprising that students' perceptions of computer-integrated learning have received considerable attention from both first- and second-language

acquisition researchers. Studies that have explored students' perceptions of computer technology in language learning indicate that students who have a positive perception of the inclusion of the CALL achieve greater success than students with a negative perception (Almekhlafi 2006). In addition, Lasagabaster and Sierra (2003) declare that students are considered potential contributors to the development of language learning tools; hence, researchers should take into consideration students' opinions when evaluating the CALL programmes like the EWP programme.

The benefits of using the Computer-Assisted Language Learning in language learning

Kocaman and Iskender (2016) point out that because English is one of the most widely used languages around the world, teachers and researchers are constantly exploring innovative ways to teach and learn the language.

Many researchers have found the CALL programme to be amongst the most popular tools used to improve students' language skills (Alrazeq & Al-Zayed 2018; Basaran 2013; Jalali & Dousti 2014; Manalu 2014; Shams 2008). Haythornthwaite and Andrews (2007:221) argue that the introduction of computer technology into the classroom has replaced textbooks as the primary medium of instruction. This change has influenced how teachers teach and how students learn. For example, Ahmad (2011) and Kerimbaeva, Niyazova and Kaya (2017) claim that the introduction of computer technology in the English Foreign Language/English Second Language (EFL/ESL) classroom has allowed for greater student autonomy. This is due to the fact that there has been consensus amongst researchers regarding the need for a shift from teacher-centred instruction to learner-centred instruction (Ahmad 2011; Kerimbaeva et al. 2017).

Many researchers believe that computer technology is the ideal tool to enhance students' English language learning. For example, Afshari et al. (2013) are of the view that computers have been recognised as a valuable resource for the teaching of foreign and second languages at many universities. This view is in line with Lee (2000) who states that using computers in second language instruction could significantly enhance the learning process, increase the availability of authentic materials, encourage greater interaction between teachers and students as well as between peers, emphasise individual needs, expand the source of available information and enlarge global understanding. Similarly, Almekhlafi (2006) declares that the CALL programme has a positive effect on students' learning and language competency. In addition, Tafazoli, Gomez Parra and Huertas Abriel (2018) argue that using computers not only leads to an increase in instructional effectiveness and efficacy, but also promotes positive social interaction and enhances student motivation. Similarly, Warschauer (1996) suggests that independence and flexibility in language learning and teaching are key benefits of incorporating the CALL programme into a learning strategy. Tafazoli et al.

(2018) point out that the primary goal of CALL programme is not simply to use various technological programmes and tools in the classroom, but to facilitate language learning by providing a suitable situated learning context.

According to Wangru (2016), advances in computer technology have motivated teachers to reassess the place of computer's in education and to regard it as a valuable tool for foreign and/or second language teaching and learning. Tafazoli et al. (2018) argue that one of the advantages of the CALL programme is that it utilises some modern methods, for example communicative language teaching and task-based learning, in addition to making various approaches to improve student autonomy available.

Nielson (2011) declares that there are many language training software packages intended for self-study available; however, little is known about their effect on learning and under what conditions they should be used. Nielson conducted a study at the University of Maryland Centre for Advanced Study of Language with the aim to explore the way adult learners use Rosetta Stone and Auralog's TELL ME MOR programme. The findings of the study revealed a severe participant attrition rate, which were consequences of a variety of technical problems as well as the lack of sufficient support for autonomous learning. This situation could lead to greater student frustration.

Pellettieri (2010) conducted a study that sought to investigate whether Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication (SCMC) or online chat would lead foreign language learners to engage in a more acquisition-rich discourse than would interaction in an oral mode. Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication is a technology that allows two or more people to communicate with each other by typing messages that are exchanged instantaneously over a network and displayed in a shared posting space (Pellettieri 2010:41).

Similarly, Olaniran (2009) states that a key requirement for SCMC is the need for all participants or users to be present during interaction regardless of physical location. The findings of the studies conducted by both Pellettieri (2010) and Olaniran (2009) revealed that SCMC had a significant impact on second language development.

Students' frustrations pertaining to the use of Computer-Assisted Language Learning

Despite the facilitating role played by computer technology in the learning process, some studies perceive it as an impediment to progress and could result in student frustration (Ambrose & Palpanathon 2017; Lazar et al. 2006). According to Lazar et al. (2006:189), frustrations occur when there is an inhibiting condition interfering with or stopping the realisation of a goal. Ceaparu et al. (2004) believe that frustrations with technology can be the result of factors internal to the end-user (poor training, lack of

knowledge and reticence to read relevant instructions) or external to the end-user (flaws in computer hardware and software, failures in network integration and malicious interventions such as malware).

Adegbore (2015) conducted a study on the effects of stress and frustration associated with the use of ICT for research purposes by undergraduates in Nigeria. The findings of the study revealed that stress and frustration had a significant effect on students' use of ICT for research purposes; that there was a need to create a conducive environment for students regarding the use of the tool and that students needed guidance in order to get the best out of an ICT infrastructure. Capdeferro and Romero (2012) are of the view that in learning contexts, students often report experiencing a range of emotions and that frustration is one of the negative emotions that they deal with. Capdeferro and Romero (2012) conclude that the perceived level of frustration is important to explore because higher levels of negative emotions can affect student learning.

Methodology

Design

The study was qualitative in nature and a case study design was followed. Creswell (2014:14) states that a case study is a form of enquiry that is used by researchers to develop an in-depth analysis of a case, a process or a group of people. In the current study, the perceptions of a certain group of students towards the EWP programme in one university are regarded as a case. The researchers in this study used this case to gain an understanding of the participants' perceptions of the EWP programme used as a tool to develop English language proficiency.

The target population for this study comprised 450 first-year ICT Foundation students registered for a Diploma in Information Communication Technology (ICT) at a South African University of Technology. From this population, 60 students were purposively sampled. Etikan, Musa and Alkassim (2016) state that the purposive sampling technique is the deliberate selection of a participant because of the qualities the participants possess. In this case, first-year ICT Foundation students registered for a Diploma in ICT in 2017 were regarded as participants who could and were willing to share their perceptions of the EWP programme after they had been exposed to it.

Participants

The study was conducted at a University of Technology, where students enrolled for the Foundation programme in ICT were the focus of the study. The sample consisted of both male and female students. The age distribution of the respondents ranged between 18 and 25 years and their mother tongues or First Languages varied from Afrikaans, English, siSwati, Setswana, Sepedi, isiZulu, Tshivenda and Portuguese.

Data collection method

Focus group interviews were conducted with the students to solicit information from the participants.

Denscombe (2007:115) defines a focus group interview as 'a group comprised of individuals with certain characteristics who focus discussions on a given issue or topic'. Stewart and Shamdasoni (1990) point out that focus group interviews provides a rich and detailed set of data about perceptions, thoughts, feelings and impressions of people using their own words. In the current study, the researchers used focus group interviews in order to understand the students' perceptions of their use of the EWP programme.

Focus group interviews were held during the period between September and November 2017 and were conducted at the institution at which the students were enrolled. The purpose of the study was explained to the students and they were informed of their rights as potential research participants. The students were divided into 12 groups composed of five participants each. Each group consisted of both male and female students. The researcher responsible for conducting the interviews introduced prompts in order to stimulate and focus discussions. Each interview took about 55 minutes. A tape recorder was used to record the interviews, which was done with the permission of the interviewees.

Data analysis

Content analysis was used in analysing the data. Silverman (2004) is of the view that content analysis produces a relatively systematic comprehensive summary of data. In the current study, recurrent trends were systematically identified and grouped together. Once grouped and analysed for validation purposes, the researchers provided the participants with feedback on the transcriptions of their individual responses to confirm whether the transcriptions were a true reflection of what they had said.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was granted by the Tshwane University of Technology's Research Ethics Committee on 03 September 2015, with ethical clearance number REC/2015/05/012.

Findings

The findings that emerged from an analysis of the transcripts of the focus group interview held with 60 students (12 groups of 5) are discussed below under the following headings: (1) the students' perceptions of the strengths of the EWP programme, (2) the students' perceptions of the frustrations of the EWP programme, (3) the students' perceptions of their mode of learning, and (4) the students' perceptions of the contribution of the EWP programme in improving their language skills. Codes like SP1, 2, 3 up to 60 were used to ensure the anonymity of the participants. In the context of this study, SP stands for Student Participant.

The students' perceptions of the strengths of the English Word Power programme

Concerning the above theme, most students said that they were pleased with the fact that the EWP programme was easily accessible. This was because the students were allocated a one-and-a-half hour slot per week specifically for the programme, but could also access the programme software online from off campus locations and it was easy for the students to access the EWP programme through their cell phones. They were particularly pleased that access to the EWP programme was not restricted to the EWP programme lab sessions only. The students added that they were able to use the programme whenever it was convenient. Accessibility of the programme also implies increased learning opportunities for students. This suggested that the students' absence from classes did not prevent them from learning. Responding to the question, one student is recorded as having said:

'Yes, the EWP is a relevant resource for learning. You work at your own pace, it is available at anytime and anywhere you need. For example, my absence in class does not restrict me from learning. I can even use my cell phone. Even if I do not attend the class, I get access to the EWP. Even at the res I can continue working.' (Participant 20, University student, 12 October 2015)

This student echoed the sentiments of other students who found the EWP programme relevant, available and accessible.

Responding to the same question, another student mentioned that:

'After using the EWP programme, "I felt motivated to use it because initially I thought we were just gonna do spelling and that is for Grade 3, but when the EWP was introduced, I realised my spelling was not up to standard, so I started to see how useful the EWP was".' (Participant 5, University student, 12 October 2015)

This response suggests that the student found the EWP programme beneficial, motivating and useful.

Another strength related to the EWP programme mentioned by the students was that the students competed against each other as individuals within groups. They explained that they would normally check each other's progress after each session to see who had completed the largest number of exercises. This seemed to encourage them to work harder. If the students were not using this group competition to motivate one another, many of them would not have been as motivated as they were. This was made clear when one participant stated:

'If we were, just doing individually and there was no competition I would have given up long ago because that thing is so boring.' (Participant 45, University student, 12 October 2015)

Also contributing to the same issue, another student said:

'I was motivated because we were working in groups; we were "groupeting" against each other by checking each other's marks

and progress after each session. I wanted to be number one. In addition, the mini tests give you the percentage and tell you how much you got.' (Participant 10, University student, 12 October 2015)

Responding to the same issue, another student said:

'The assessments after each learning unit are useful because by continuously checking our scores we are also able to check our progress and see the language areas we are still struggling with so that we can focus more on the areas of weakness. In addition, I like the fact that you can do it anywhere and anytime, even with your phone. Sometimes it gets boring here at res especially on weekends so we need something to keep us busy, so the EWP comes in handy. Therefore, I am doing it for both boredom and marks. However, I doubt if without marks I would be doing it.' (Participant 55, University student, 12 October 2015)

The fact that students would use the EWP programme outside the lab sessions seemed to be an indication of their level of motivation. The allocation of marks also served as motivation and as testimony for measuring learning performance. The very fact that students were able to use assessments to check their progress and to establish the language areas that were problematic is an indication of the usefulness of the programme concerning learning performance. An increase in the access to a learning programme has been mentioned and established in many other studies that have been conducted. For example, Yousuf (2007:1) who conducted a study in Turkey on the effectiveness of mobile learning in distance education found that the advantage of technology is that 'it can be used anywhere, anytime and its usage is easy access to a larger number of distance learners' and this has bearing on the learning performance of the students. In other words, students' chances for learning opportunities are improved and this is likely to affect their learning performance, which this is echoed by some students in the current study who declared that the EWP programme has improved their language skills.

The students' perceptions of their frustrations with the English Word Power programme

Many students complained about the various technical problems they experienced whilst using the EWP programme. They pointed out that there were instances where they would not be able to log in and this made it difficult for them to do additional work on the EWP programme in their free time. They also complained about the slow speed of the network that restricted their progress. They added that in some cases, the programme would freeze whilst they were working on it. Some students indicated that the worst-case scenario involved experiencing technical problems such as receiving incorrect answers and when the programme rejected what they believed to be correct answers. In this regard, one student posited:

'There are certain words that you know they are correct but when you write them, the programme says that you are wrong. I think that thing was programmed to say you are wrong.' (Participant 60, University student, 13 October 2015)

Responding to the same issue, another student said:

'It is not interesting at all, we are repeating the same exercises and they are too long. It is frustrating to know that I can't spell as well as I thought I did. Moreover, this programme is boring; they just give you options, you can guess any word and type it as your answer without understanding anything. The focus is on the right answer and not understanding.' (Participant 3, University student, 13 October 2015)

These utterances are also a contradiction of what other students stated previously as the strengths of the programme.

Similarly, another student said:

'The one-word answers are boring, it would be better if they focused on the sentence and not just one-word responses. Ay! It is boring and I hate it. Anything interactive and IT related would be better than the EWP.' (Participant 15, University student, 13 October 2015)

Contributing to the same issue, a student said:

'The EWP can discourage you when you fail an activity you feel stupid and the questions are too long. They seem easy but when you write they are difficult. The network sometimes is so slow. Sometimes the EWP gives you wrong answers. You punch in the correct answer and it tells you that you are wrong and if you ask the lecturers to assist, they tell you that it is a software error and they cannot do anything to assist you. This leaves one confused without knowing which one is the correct answer.' (Participant 25, University student, 13 October 2015)

Responding to the same question, another student declared:

'Password is sometimes a problem. You log in and the system says 'incorrect username or password' and knowing very well that it is the correct one. This frustrates me, especially when I realise how far the other students have gone.' (Participant 54, University student, 13 October 2015)

It is clear that the technical challenges presented by the EWP programme are likely to hinder the students' progress, and this may have been worsened by an unhelpful or unsympathetic reaction from their facilitators.

The students also indicated that the EWP programme's strict rules were a serious challenge. They explained that the programme is case sensitive and only accepts responses when the correct case is used and, as a result, case mismatches are considered incorrect. They also mentioned that an extra space results in the answer being considered incorrect. This led to many students developing feelings of frustration as they did not understand how a seemingly correct answer was considered to be incorrect, simply because of the case and the space as also confirmed by the utterance below, by the student:

'The EWP is case sensitive and therefore, accepts only responses when the correct case is used. This can frustrate you if you are not aware of this because you will keep on wondering why the correct answer is not accepted.' (Participant 18, University student, 14 October 2015)

The students' utterances suggest that the students were not aware of the way the EWP programme was programmed and

that the application could not distinguish between an incorrect answer and a simple misuse of spaces or case.

The majority of the participants regarded much of the content of the EWP programme to be irrelevant because the activities, rules and assessments deal with general language skills, for example, tenses, vocabulary, spelling and sentence construction. According to the students, these are necessary skills but it would be better if they were using a CALL application that was specifically aimed at IT students, as suggested by one student in the following statement:

'No, the content is too general, if it had more IT words it would be better; therefore, the content is irrelevant for IT students, there are words like bakery and they have nothing to do with us as IT students. Sometimes what the EWP teaches us is what we have already done at high school.' (Participant 33, University student, 14 October 2015)

This statement also suggests that some students had a negative attitude towards the EWP programme. Other similar studies have revealed that students complained about the frustrating element of the CALL programme. In this regard, the results of a study conducted by Hara and Kling (1999) revealed that students experienced frustration whilst taking a web-based distance education course.

The students' preferred mode of learning

Many students expressed a preference for face-to-face learning. They explained that they preferred interactive learning that involved interacting with fellow students and with their facilitators. For this reason, some students were not in favour of using the EWP programme. Justifying their concern, some students indicated that the EWP programme did not give feedback as a facilitator would. The participants pointed out that the EWP programme merely indicates to the user that an answer is incorrect but did not provide the correct alternative or offer an explanation outlining why the answer was incorrect. One participant said:

'It is boring; they just give you options, you can guess any word and type it as your answer without understanding anything and normally it is just one word. The focus is on the right answer and not understanding. Even when you are wrong, there is no one to ask.' (Participant 17, University student, 14 October 2015)

Responding to the same question, another participant said:

'I prefer face-to-face contact. The EWP does not bring clarity when there is a misunderstanding. It is not responsive. It only tells you when your answer is correct or wrong but does not explain anything. Maybe we prefer other programmes but not the EWP.' (Participant 42, University student, 14 October 2015)

As the EWP programme did not provide feedback and did not offer the correct alternative, it was evident that the students did not consider it an effective and beneficial medium of learning. Participants considered the information in the EWP programme to be incomplete because they did

not know what their errors were; as a result, is a likelihood that the same errors would be repeated. In a similar study, Musingafi et al. (2015) reported that the Zimbabwean students were frustrated by ineffective feedback and difficulties in access and use of ICT.

The students' testimonies about the contribution of the English Word Power programme in improving their language skills

Some students acknowledged the positive role played by the EWP programme to develop their language skills. Specifically, some students indicated that their language skills had improved after using the EWP programme. They also stated about their improvement regarding their English language proficiency related to language areas, such as spelling and vocabulary.

Responding to the question, one participant said:

'My language skills have improved, not drastically, but there is an improvement. Using the EWP reminded me of stuff that I have forgotten, for example plurals, conjunctions and abbreviations.' (Participant 2, University student, 15 October 2015)

Responding to the same question, another participant said:

'Well, at the beginning I would just use any conjunctions anyhow without thinking whether they are correct or not when writing, but now I think about its relevance before using a conjunction. I think I am more aware of my grammar so I use it better. Things like tenses have been confusing me but now, since I started using the EWP, I am getting my tenses correct so it means I am improving.' (Participant 34, University student, 15 October 2015)

Also contributing to the same issue, a participant said:

'It has definitely improved when it comes to spelling. The EWP programme sometimes gives you words, which have same spelling or the spelling is almost similar. I think it is just trying to trick us, but 75% of the time, I would get it right.' (Participant 58, University student, 15 October 2015)

The researchers' opinion regarding some students' positive testimony about the benefits of the EWP programme is that the students were becoming aware of their limited language proficiency and it was this awareness that facilitated a willingness to improve. Through exposure to the EWP programme, the participants became more accommodating and adopted new words to expand their own lexicon. Other similar studies, like Nachoua (2012), discovered that the CALL programme plays an important role in improving students' language skills.

Discussion of findings

The aim of the study was to explore the university students' perceptions of the use of the EWP programme as a supplementary language learning tool in their English classroom. Regarding the students' perceptions of the strengths of the EWP programme, the findings of the study revealed that some students were pleased with the fact that

they could access the programme easily. They were particularly pleased that they were not restricted to work during the EWP programme lab sessions only. This implies that the students' opportunities to learn were maximised by the easy access of the programme. This finding is in line with various studies that were conducted on the perceptions of students using the CALL programmes. For example, Erguvan (2015) conducted a study that sought responses about participants' perceptions related to the strengths and weaknesses of the CALL programme. The results indicated that students enjoyed using the programme. In another similar study, Marimuthu and Govender (2018) conducted a study on the students' perceptions of Scratch programming amongst secondary school students in KwaZulu-Natal. Although this study was conducted at a high school, the context is the same as the current study in that both studies were conducted in South Africa and are on language learning through technology. The results of the study indicated that grade 10 students perceived the Scratch programme to be easy to use and was useful.

Another strength the students mentioned for the EWP programme was that it afforded them the opportunity to compete against each other as individuals within groups. This spirit of competition provided an incentive to complete the various tasks and subsequently encouraged students to work harder. This finding is in line with the TPB, about motivating factors that influence behaviour. Therefore, the positive aspects of the EWP programme mentioned by the students have the potential to motivate the students to change their perceptions. In addition, this finding is linked to the TPB's subjective norm, which is the third construct and involves social pressure to perform or not to perform a given behaviour. In this study, social pressure seems to play a positive role where the spirit of competition facilitates the learning process.

Apart from the strengths the EWP programme offered, the findings revealed that students reported experiencing various frustrations when engaging with the programme. These frustrations were because of various technical problems, such as instances where students would not be able to log in, the slow speed of the network and when students received incorrect answers that were 'supposed' to be correct. This finding is in line with the results of a study conducted by Adegboro (2015) which was carried out to establish the effects of stress and frustration on the use of ICT for research by undergraduate students. Adegboro concluded that stress and frustration have a significant effect on students' engagement with ICT. In another similar study, Hara and Kling (1999) observed that students' frustrations emanated from three interrelated sources. These are lack of prompt feedback, ambiguous instructions on the web and technical problems. This finding is also aligned with the TPB's second construct, which is the extent to which a person has a favourable or unfavourable appraisal of a given behaviour. The 'frustration' element of the TPB is likely to have a negative effect on students' perception and use of the EWP programme.

The results of this study also revealed that the majority of the participants regarded the content of the EWP programme to be irrelevant because the activities, rules and assessments dealt with general language skills, such as tenses, vocabulary, spelling and sentence construction. According to the participants, although these skills are important, using IT-related content would have served them better. This shows that to some extent, the EWP programme content was not relevant for the IT students and subsequently, there was little motivation to use it. This finding is in line with the results of a study conducted by Bicer and Parmaksiz (2013) who found that their participants observed that the content of the Quartet Online programme was boring, quite repetitive, mechanical and above their level because it did not mirror the students' course book.

Regarding the students' preferred mode of learning, the findings showed that many students preferred face-to-face learning. They explained that they preferred learning, that is, interacting with their fellow students and with their facilitators. Some students indicated that the EWP programme did not give feedback as a facilitator would. This finding supports the findings of a study conducted by McCourt and Radcliff (2000) that examined the effectiveness of Probabilistic Estimation of Expression Residuals (PEER) accounting software from the students' perspective. The results of their study indicated that students preferred traditional lectures and tutorials to PEER. Sharifi et al. (2015) conducted another similar study on the effectiveness of Rosetta stone language learning programme that claims to teach languages more effectively than a typical classroom learning environment. Sadly, the results of their study indicated that, although the programme was able to deliver success in some areas, it was not capable of replacing the classroom language learning experience.

The findings related to students' testimonies about the contribution of the EWP programme in improving their language skills revealed that some students perceived their language skills to have improved after using the EWP programme. They also stated that their testimonies regarding their proficiency related to language areas, such as spelling and vocabulary, were not at the level they had initially thought before working on the programme. This finding is in line with the findings of a study conducted by Alizadeh (2018) amongst the Iranian medical students using e-learning tools and applications in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programme. The results of Alizadeh's study indicated that some students perceived that using electronic tools and application for educational purposes in the programme was highly significant.

Conclusion

Through this study, the researchers endeavoured to explore students' perceptions of the EWP programme, a CALL programme. The results of the study revealed that some students were pleased with the easy access of the EWP programme as they regarded this as improving their learning opportunities. However, the participants also indicted various frustrations associated with the EWP

programme. Technical challenges were found to frustrate students. As already highlighted in the literature review, if students are frustrated, it means they are blocked from reaching their desired outcomes. Therefore, in the current study easy access to the programme improved learning opportunity and subsequently improved some students' learning performance as witnessed by some students with regard to the improvement of their language skills.

The findings further revealed that the content of the EWP programme was often considered irrelevant for IT students. In this regard, the participants would have preferred a programme that would be meaningfully situated within an IT context. They also complained about the focus on individual words. This might mean that the EWP programme provides a traditional way of teaching vocabulary where new words are taught in isolation. Based on the participants' responses, the EWP programme also lacked student-student and teacher-student interaction. This is significant, because current approaches to language teaching encourage student engagement. Regarding students' testimonies about the contribution made by the EWP programme in improving their language skills, some students declared that their language skills had improved in areas such as spelling and vocabulary. However, some of the participants were quick to mention that the vocabulary offered by the EWP programme was generic vocabulary that did not assist them much in the IT field.

The study provides lecturers and developers with insight into the students' concerns, which places them in a better position to take informed decisions regarding students' perceptions of the CALL applications such as the EWP programme. Previous studies have focused much on the positive side of the CALL programme concerning language learning. The current study has focused on the good as well as the bad side of the CALL programme, specifically the EWP programme. The significance of the results of this study is that technology cannot replace lecturers. However, there is a need for lecturer training so that they are made aware of how to use technology to teach students. Now, especially based on the findings of the current study, the EWP programme is treated as a stand-alone facility that is used to teach the students. There is no clear role played by the lecturers and this is what leads to student frustration. Lecturers do not seem to provide support or answers to students' challenges related to the EWP programme. Therefore, it is clear that learning through technology needs teacher training on how to use technology to facilitate learning.

The study had its limitations. For example, the failure to establish the lecturers' perceptions, relying only on the qualitative data and focusing on a single CALL application programme to the exclusion of the overall students' performance in the English module. However, the results did provide insight into the opinions of the selected students regarding the inclusion of the EWP programme in their English language classroom. It is hoped that

facilitators will take note of the students' perceptions as they reflect on their practice.

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The authors have declared that they have no financial or personal relationship that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

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Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

Disclaimer

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