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First-year English Additional Language students' insight and attitudes on blended learning methods in academic writing

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Teachers in the current digital era are required to integrate Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in their daily teaching and must replace their traditional methods with modern tools and facilities. This is because ICT provides a dynamic and proactive teaching and learning environment. Consequently, the current study sought to establish how English First Additional Language (EFAL) Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) college first-year students understood face-to-face instruction and blended learning (BL) environments for academic writing. The study was qualitative in nature and a case study design was followed. Twelve purposively selected first-year students were involved in semi-structured interviews as part of data collection. In this study constructivism was used as theoretical framework with reference to BL and academic writing. The findings of the study revealed that most students were in favour of the face-to-face learning mode because of its advantages in their learning context. Those who were not in favour of BL posited that it had the potential to facilitate inequality among students as it was likely to benefit only those who could afford to buy data. The findings further revealed that participants believed that the combination of both face-to-face and online learning modes may be conducive to the context of learning academic writing. They contend that the two types of learning are inextricably linked.

Contribution: The study may contribute to knowledge on the measures that TVET institutions and other tertiary institutions can develop and implement academic writing practices and BL practices to aid the success of EFAL first-year students. The study was an attempt to provide feedback to academia on the current perspectives and experiences of first-year ESL students at TVET colleges to distinguish areas of limitations with reference to valuable teaching and learning, academic writing and BL practices that compromise quality.

Keywords: first-year students; student attitudes; understanding blended learning; face-to-face learning; TVET institution; English as a second language; English first additional language.

Introduction

The rapid development of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has elevated blended learning (BL) to the top of the list of concerns that academics in education face (Ghavifekr et al. 2008). According to Ghavifekr et al. (2008), this is because of its capacity to offer an active and dynamic teaching and learning environment. Therefore, Ghavifekr et al. (2008) suggest that teachers must include ICT in their everyday lessons to keep up with the present digital environment, and they must exchange their outdated teaching techniques for more contemporary ones. Many approaches have been developed for this purpose, including e-learning, distance learning and more recently BL, and many universities are adopting these approaches to teach students (Aladwan et al. 2018). This view is supported by Korkmaz and Karakus (2009), who explain that it could be argued that online teaching-learning environments are rapidly evolving because of the proliferation of computers and the internet. The authors also point out that online teaching-learning environments lack many advantages when considering face-to-face environments, which led to the idea of BL.

According to Wardaningsih (2016), face-to-face teaching refers to the traditional or conventional classroom where the teachers and students are in a place dedicated to teaching, and therefore teaching and learning occur simultaneously. On the other hand, Wardaningsih (2016) defines BL simply as a combination of face-to-face and online classes. The idea of BL is supported by Sikora

and Carrol (2002) who report that online higher education students tend to be less satisfied with online-only courses compared to traditional courses. To remedy this, Murphy (2003) claims that a combination of online learning and traditional learning environments could be much more useful in solving educational problems and meeting educational needs. Nazara and Wardaningsih (2019) assert that BL has attracted many researchers and educators because of its potential to maximise face-to-face instruction and ICT to promote learning.

Because of the accelerated dominance of ICT in the education sector already mentioned earlier, many studies have been conducted focusing on students' attitudes towards BL and face-to-face classes. Wardaningsih (2016) argues that studies on student attitudes towards face-to-face and BL instruction are important to have a more solid basis for the use of ICT in learning. The results of the studies conducted on student understanding and attitudes towards face-to-face and BL modes have produced contrasting results. For example, Nazara and Wardaningsih (2019) conducted a study on students' attitudes towards face-to-face and BL instruction in the English class and their preference for these two learning modes. The results revealed that although the students approved face-to-face instruction, they regarded BL as more effective, efficient, convenient and useful in learning. However, other studies have come to conflicting conclusions. For example, the results of a study conducted by Putra Nasution et al. (2020) found that face-to-face learning was the top choice by students when compared to BL. Similar results were shown by Bali and Liu (2018) who found that positive perceptions of face-to-face learning were higher when compared to the online learning mode. It is worth noting that in some cases, students preferred both face-to-face and BL modes. For example, the results of a study conducted by Nikolopoulou (2022) revealed that students' preferences for their education emphasised both face-to-face and blended instruction.

Given the conflicting research results mentioned earlier, there is a need for further research in this area. This study therefore aimed to examine the understanding and attitudes of first-year English First Additional Language (EFAL) Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) college students towards face-to-face and online learning methods in academic writing. To this end, the study aimed to provide answers to the following research question: *What are first-year EFAL TVET college students' understanding of, and attitudes towards face-to-face learning and blended modes in academic writing?*

Theoretical framework

In this study constructivism was considered as the educational and theoretical framework with reference to BL and academic writing. Constructivism, as advocated by Vygotsky (1978), holds that education can affect the way students, in this case TVET students, are taught and the way they learn. It is a model that presents knowledge as an individual's active composition based on the individual's

experience and internal cognitive processes. New knowledge is integrated with prior knowledge. Constructivism is a learning theory that stems from psychology and provides insights into the process of knowledge acquisition and learning. Constructivist theories of learning traditionally refer to how the mind constructs knowledge and are typically rooted in the tradition of genetic epistemology of Jean Piaget (Van Der Linde 2020). In BL that incorporates constructivism, students are active, on their own and seek information and knowledge. They also willingly determine how to achieve the desired learning outcomes. They do not rely on instructors to get information. They are active participants in their own learning. This makes it easy for them to collaborate with their peers and proffer solutions to their problems.

Literature review
Students' attitudes towards face-to-face and blended learning modes in academic writing

According to Dziuban et al. (2018), BL is a double component and involves integration of traditional face-to-face education with technological generated platforms. As the concept of BL is the integration of technology and online teaching and learning with traditional approaches, it is anticipated that students will be interested in using both digital spaces thus to promote understanding of face-to-face and BL modes. In addition, Fakhir (2015) maintains that MoEs (Ministry of Educations) should explore BL approaches. This indicates the need for investigating the use of BL approaches in education. Indeed, BL integrates the existing teaching and learning practices with the new technological-oriented approaches.

Blended learning not only provides more options for students but also has other benefits, such as improving access to learning materials and enhancing the quality of learning. Various academic activities such as lecturing, group and individual projects, presentations, resource sharing and free discussions can be applied in combination with face-to-face classrooms and online learning (Khan et al. 2012). Blended learning activities provide an explicit focus on course content that improves students' academic performance and encourages 21st century skills, including soft and hard skills. These are both improved when students interact through various activities inside and outside the classroom through online learning and as a result students show boldness with regards to this initiative. Singh and Singh (2017) also state that BL gives the opportunity and enables the environment for students to communicate actively with other students, which ultimately leads to communication, teamwork, problem-solving and learning skills. As part of BL, online learning allows the students to connect with classroom activities at any time in any place; thus, students become self-directed and demonstrate positive attitude to face-to-face and BL modes (Nathan & Rajamanoharane 2016).

Singh and Singh (2017) echo that it allows students to work together and report back or present to the class, thereby encouraging student-to-student interaction. Furthermore, teachers can provide clear directions and realistic goals for

group and individual assignments. Their roles include designing blended activities for face-to-face and online learning and giving directions and instruction to enable students to acquire 21st century skills through academic activities within and outside the classroom. Hadiyanto (2019) states that these activities can be managed through online learning to boost their 21st century skills. Students interact, read, question and discuss the resources provided by the instructor. A class member can upload multiple resources to share with all class members to learn, compare, analyse and extract the necessary information from them.

In the context of English as a foreign language, blended and face-to-face learning modes have also become a major interest to many researchers. Various studies have examined how students positively view the use of BL and face-to-face modes in English as a Second Language (EFAL) classes (Gilbert 2013). Some researchers claim that many EFAL students have a positive view of BL (Wang et al. 2019; Wright 2017). The correlation between experiences of BL and the level of English proficiency was also investigated by some researchers (Akbarov, Gönen & Aydoğan 2018; Ferheen Bukhari & Mahmoud Basaffar 2019). Researchers such as Sari and Wahyudin (2019) also highlight that students demonstrated positive attitudes regarding a combination of online and face-to-face learning modes used in BL.

Blended learning supports the EFAL students' learning performance. Akbarov et al. (2018) state that EFAL students have the motivation to use BL while it enhances their professional performances. In fact, the motivation to use BL directly affects the learners' performance and this effective performance leads to academic achievements. It also supports the idea that learners have a positive attitude towards the implementation of BL approaches in their classrooms. According to Dziuban et al. (2018), using a BL approach, learners evaluate their educational experiences.

Research methods and design

The study followed a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research is considered to 'discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and world views of the people involved' (Mertler 2016). The qualitative research approach was deemed relevant for the current study, as the aim of the study was to seek students' views on blended teaching and learning. The study adopted a case study design. Priya (2016) argues that a case study involves a detailed study of the unit of analysis within its natural setting.

Participants

The location of this study was a TVET institution in the Western Cape in South Africa. The participants in the study were selected based on the likelihood of getting relevant information from them. Thus, the study used purposive sampling. Here, a particular setting, person or event is deliberately chosen to provide important information that could not be obtained from other choices (Maree & Pietersen 2020). Twelve first-year EFAL students were selected from a TVET College in the Western Cape on voluntary basis. The sample size consisting of 12 participants is supported by Dworkin (2012) who suggests that 5–50 participants are adequate in qualitative research.

Data collection

Table 1 indicates the social demographic details of the participants. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. The interviews were conducted over a period of 2 weeks and lasted 15–25 min. They were done via a telephone conversation, as preferred by the research participants (see Appendix 1).

Data analysis

The first step was to transcribe the collected data. The three researchers went through the text individually and organised a meeting where they shared their interpretation of the data. Categories were developed and coding was done by the three researchers. They also agreed on the themes that were developed.

Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was made to the Tshwane University of Technology's Research Ethics Committee and ethics consent was received on 29 April 2021. The ethics approval number is FCRE/APL/STD/2021/12.

Findings

The research question focused on the EFAL TVET college first-year students' understanding of BL and their attitudes towards both face-to-face learning and online learning in academic writing. Responding to the interview questions, some participants (P1, P3, P6, P10) opted either for face-to-face or online learning (P12, P2, P5). Other participants (P4, P7, P8, P9, P11) preferred a combination of the two learning modes. In addition, students linked the use of the two learning modes to the learning of academic writing. Two themes that emerged from the collected data pertain to

TABLE 1: Social demographic details of the participants.

Participant	Code	Ethnicity	Age (years)	Type of school
Participant 1	P1	IsiZulu person	22	Township
Participant 2	P2	Mixed race person	19	Former model C
Participant 3	P3	Indian person	17	Township
Participant 4	P4	Mixed race person	18	Former model C
Participant 5	P5	IsiZulu person	21	Township
Participant 6	P6	Mixed race person	17	Township
Participant 7	P7	Indian person	19	Township
Participant 8	P8	Mixed race person	20	Former model C
Participant 9	P9	Mixed race person	18	Township
Participant 10	P10	IsiZulu person	18	Township
Participant 11	P11	IsiZulu person	19	Township
Participant 12	P12	Mixed race person	21	Former model C

Source: Meyers, F.A.W., 2023, *English second language students' perceptions and experiences of academic writing in a blended learning context: A survey of a South African technical and vocational education and technology college*, PhD thesis, Tshwane University of Technology, Pretoria.

students' preferences of learning mode and their importance regarding academic writing lessons.

Theme 1: Students' preferences for blended and face-to-face learning modes

The students expressed their learning mode preferences:

'For me, blended learning is about when we as students learn either face-to-face or using an online platform.' (P10)

'Learning online is not like being in class when the lecturer explains; face-to-face learning is definitely better. In face-to-face learning, we pause the lecturer and request explanations.' (P12)

'Both face-to-face and online learning are preferred in my opinion. In face-to-face learning, sometimes the lecturers do not express themselves clearly and students are left behind. We don't even get feedback. It seems as if students are not teaching or getting enough from them. Also, we're not engaging. I think learning happens if everyone is participating. With online learning also, we're not too engaged. Otherwise, it is just a presentation. It becomes so boring, and we don't get the maximum benefit. When we have WhatsApp sessions, for example, when we log off, there is no returning. There are other platforms like WhatsApp and Whatnot. But lecturers also have their own time. One can only consult with them during working hours, but they do send learning materials and videos on our WhatsApp groups, and on our LMS, but the PowerPoints take time to download. I think the system is slow.' (P7)

'Personally, I'm so used to face-to-face learning. I'm used to it in the past and now if I have face-to-face classes I am comfortable. With online learning, you need to adapt like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp and learn from a screen. Usually, with face-to-face learning, there is a person there to teach you.' (P9)

'I prefer face-to-face learning; one can engage with the lecturer and the other students. Online learning requires the Internet, and not all have access to the Internet, especially if at home and not on campus.' (P8)

'Face-to-face learning is much better; I can understand more, and I can relate more to the lecturer when the lecturer is in front of me or us and when they teach us face-to-face. That is why face-to-face learning for me is better. Online learning is not interactive or engaging for me, but I do use Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and the LMS. It is like I do not know how to explain it, but face-to-face learning is much better than online learning.' (P11)

'Most of us don't use the LMS; I think it is not useful. Firstly, they told us to access the LMS platform as it's free, but when I accessed it, it needed data. But if your Internet connection is good, I would say the LMS is fine. The LMS is also nice when it comes to downloading notes, passing exam papers and to watch videos about the class work, but you need data.' (P8)

Theme 2: The importance of face-to-face and blended learning modes in acquiring academic writing skills

Regarding the use of the aforementioned learning modes in the context of learning academic writing, the participants had the following to say:

'Maybe they teach us using blended and face-to-face learning to groom us into the business world, using academic writing to succeed; how to write a business letter; to be able to communicate with clients. I understand that is the purpose for us to succeed, by doing all these assignments, test, and exams.' (P3)

'I think the purpose of academic writing and learning with the combination of face-to-face and blended learning is preparing me for work readiness. It will make me a competent worker. By writing I will be able to express myself, and it also assesses my understanding.' (P2)

'In a case of academic essays, one can't just write as one wishes because one is writing for a mark. These marks then contribute towards the exams. We do portfolios of evidence, and we add our recent plans to our portfolios of evidence, as part of our practical file. This is to show what experience one gained in a real-life situation. One can apply for a job some day and then one can show the portfolio of evidence. For me this is when it comes to academic writing, face-to-face and blended learning in and how I understand it.' (P4)

'All our assignments and tasks we do prepare us for practical work. One will need to do research on how people live and find out if they receive proper service, so all these assignments really prepare us for our lives. We need to do research online about the municipality, write a report about service delivery in the municipality, and analyse the information to write a report on service delivery so academic writing involves us and prepares us.' (P6)

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to determine how first-year students at an EFAL TVET college understood face-to-face instruction and academic writing in BL environments. The findings showed that most students favoured face-to-face instruction to online instruction. They arrived at this conclusion because some participants found it difficult to connect to the internet, which is required for online learning. Given that some students struggle to have internet access at home, this issue may be related to their socioeconomic status. The actual presence of the lecturer in front of the students was one advantage of the face-to-face form of learning. Those who opposed online learning believed it to be inadequate and not engaging. Additionally, because the students had already taken some online courses, they discussed the difficulties they had accessing the appropriate platform and the difficulties they had getting data to access the internet. The findings of the present study correspond with those of a study by Nazara and Wardaningsih (2019) that looked at students' attitudes towards face-to-face and BL in English classes and their preference for these two learning modes. They found that most students preferred BL. The findings of their study showed that, despite the students' positive opinions of face-to-face training, they believed BL was more effective, efficient, practical and beneficial.

Regarding the usefulness of the two learning modes already mentioned earlier, many students believed that the combination of both face-to-face and online learning modes may be helpful for them in the context of learning academic writing. They made a connection between a real-life scenario and the significance of mixing the two learning modes. They contend that the two types of learning are inextricably linked in the workplace. This finding is in line with the results of a study conducted by Nikolopoulou (2022). The results of this

study showed that students' preferences for their education emphasised both face-to-face and blended instruction. Tuomainen (2016) believes that different teaching approaches or modes by mixing face-to-face teaching with online learning, especially when engaging in academic writing, enhance the students' understanding of the academic writing process.

Conclusion and recommendations

In the introduction, it was mentioned that the rapid growth of ICT has provided a dynamic and proactive teaching and learning environment and as such it has become one of the most important topics discussed by scholars in education. It was further mentioned that in the current digital era, teachers are required to integrate ICT in their daily teaching and replace their traditional methods with modern tools and facilities. Despite the gains and popularity of the implementation of ICT, the results of this study revealed that the students in the context of the current study were not ready for the implementation of ICT in their classroom. Because of their socioeconomic background, they found the implementation of the ICT challenging as they did not have resources that would enable them to connect to the internet. It is important that any form of intervention to improve teaching and learning must consider the socioeconomic status of the students to avoid inequality among students. Higher education institutions have a crucial responsibility to provide students with the necessary data to enable them to use the Internet in scenarios such as the one under investigation. This may serve as an effort to level the playground so that even students from poor backgrounds receive equal opportunities in comparison to those from the advantaged families.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

Authors' contributions

F.A.W.M. drafted the article, while C.S. and M.C. reviewed it.

Funding information

Data availability

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

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Appendix 1

BOX 1- A1: Interview schedule.

1. What is your understanding of blended and face-to-face learning?
2. What is your opinion regarding online learning and face-to face learning?
3. Does your institution make use of an LMS? Motivate.
4. What do you think is the purpose of academic writing?
5. How does academic writing relate to face-to-face and blended learning?