



## Overcoming Transactional Distance through Implementing Podcasts and Vodcasts: Perceptions from an Open Distance and e-Learning University

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### ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic challenged instructional methods of teaching and learning in universities around the world. To bridge this instructional gap, many universities opted to use digital technological innovations to reach students. Yet despite implementing these innovations, many higher education institutions were not fully prepared and ready for online teaching and learning during the pandemic. Researchers have argued that podcast and vodcast implementation in higher education institutions results in no change to students' motivation and performance. Consequently, research on podcast and vodcast implementation and students' perceptions of the use of these tools in distance-learning contexts remains limited. Using email interviews and online open-ended evaluation questions, this article aims to explore first-year undergraduate students' perceptions of using podcasts and vodcasts to enhance academic writing skills in an open distance and e-Learning university in South Africa. Using transactional distance theory, the findings reveal lecturers' and students' positive perceptions towards the implementation of podcasts and vodcasts because today's students consume digital content [digital natives], enjoy the use of technology and are adept at navigating online learning. While, initially, novice lecturers were hesitant and unfamiliar with recording podcasts and vodcasts, through mediation, they ultimately recorded quality podcasts and vodcasts that were clear and employed illustrations that facilitated students' understanding of the module's content. The researchers recommend that when creating podcasts and vodcasts, lecturers consider their students' interests, motivation, language and demographic backgrounds.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital learning technologies in higher education institutions (HEIs) to address the educational challenges brought on by the healthcare crisis. Although students had many difficulties accessing content knowledge due to the rapid transition, e-Learning was embraced as a component of the crisis management system in distance-learning contexts (Mohammed, Mokhtar, Enaam, & Sana, 2022; Nikdel & Fardin, 2020). As a result, throughout the pandemic, students were encouraged by the use of e-Learning technologies and were more driven to learn (Sevnarayan, 2022). Due to the pandemic's interference and the rise in student enrolment at distance universities over recent years, open and distance and e-Learning (ODEL) is becoming increasingly popular as face-to-face universities are providing more online courses (Sevnarayan, 2022). Compared to traditional universities, ODeL has several benefits, including lower costs, more flexibility for students with full- or part-time jobs, and improved access for students facing linguistic and other challenges. However, ODeL also presents pedagogical difficulties, such as the potential for isolation and segregation (Sevnarayan, 2022).

The popularity of podcasts in education has increased significantly over time (Yiemkuntitavorn & Rattanapan, 2021). According to Crofts et al. (2005, p.1), 'podcasts' are digital audio multi-media compressed files that can be downloaded and played on any personal device. Aditya (2018) asserted that while some students struggle with the English language, podcasts enable them to access information easily and can pique their attention. Podcasts have become common in HEIs as the COVID-19 pandemic has forced lecturers and students to adopt strict online teaching and learning (Bashshur, Doarn, Frenk, Kvedar, & Woolliscroft, 2020; Crouch &

Gordon, 2019; Mooney, 2019). Additionally, this online tool can provide students with access to a collaborative setting, ease of access to resources, freedom to study the information whenever they want, and a move towards independence in learning (Faramarzi, Tabrizi, & Chalak, 2021). Audio podcasts can also be complemented by video podcasts [vodcasts] to facilitate the dissemination of course content knowledge. A vodcast [also known as a vidcast] is a digital audio and video file or clip that is distributed in a digital format via the internet to a personal device (Myers, 2022; Rica & Javier, 2021). Vodcasts meet the needs of students with a variety of learning styles, enhance engagement, reflection, and motivation, and they offer temporal flexibility, a faster way to review subject content, and the opportunity to review lectures before examinations (Gonulal, 2021; Lambert, Pond, & Witthaus, 2019; Nwachokor, Benardine, & Uddin, 2019; Shimshon-Santo, 2021; Turner, Schaefer, & Lowe, 2021; Wang & Huang, 2018). However, some studies have claimed that the use of vodcasts in HEIs produces no change in students' motivation and performance (Alshurafat, Al Shbail, & Masadeh, 2021; Caratozzolo, Alvarez-Delgado, & Hosseini, 2019; Husein, 2019; Yadegaridehkordi, Shuib, Nilashi, & Asadi, 2019).

Podcasts have been reported to be more effective at enhancing students' vocabulary, communication skills and knowledge of German orthoepic norms (Oliinyk, Gaman, Chaikovska, Bezzubova, & Paustovska, 2022). According to a systematic review by Moore (2022), podcasts encourage student engagement in active learning, foster conversations between students and groups who are underrepresented in public discourse and may strengthen blended and active learning tactics when used in curriculum preparation. Yeganeh and Izadpanah (2021) conducted a study in Iran to examine the effects of podcasts and vodcasts on motivation in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners through the development of their listening abilities. Their main finding was that the learners' listening skills were enhanced and improved by both seeing and listening to podcasts. Similar research was conducted in the Philippines by Vergara (2022) to ascertain whether using a technology-assisted resource like vodcasts in addition to printed self-learning modules may enhance ODeL students' performance during modular distance learning within the new normal education. The study revealed that using vodcasts as an addition to printed self-learning modules can enhance students' performance during the new normal education. Roy and Srivastava (2021) explored the issues and concerns surrounding the digital divide in the higher education ecosystem in the Indian context, concluding that the digital divide between students and lecturers requires further attention.

Transactional distance can be attributed to the limited face-to-face engagement associated with ODeL. Moore's (1993) "transactional distance" theory is widely accepted in online learning and serves as the theoretical foundation for this article. Based on this theory, situations involving distance learning, when a lecturer and students are separated by geography, may "lead to [communicative] gaps, a psychological space of potential misunderstandings between the instructors' and learners' behaviours" (Moore & Kearsley, 1996, p. 200). Moore recommended that ODeL stakeholders consider three factors that impact transactional distance: structure, dialogue, and autonomy (Moore, 1993; Swart & Macleod, 2021; Zhang, 2003). Structure refers to how lecturers organise their LMS tools and design, while dialogue describes how lecturers and students communicate. The level and type of student accountability and self-direction are referred to as autonomy. We demonstrate in Figure 1 below that the more structure and less dialogue, the greater the transactional distance. A module with low transactional distance is characterised by a larger teaching presence, "interpersonal closeness, sharedness, and perceived learning" among students, and is on a continuum from high to low (Huang, Chandra, & DePaolo, 2016, p. 738; Zhang, 2003).

Interestingly, the researchers had difficulty locating recent research relating to lecturers' perceptions of creating podcasts and vodcasts. This study hopes to fill this gap by using Moore's theory of transactional distance to analyse data collected from a South African ODeL university and to make recommendations for stakeholders in distance HEIs. This study argues that the use of podcasts and vodcasts in teaching and learning may reduce transactional distance and feelings of disconnectedness and isolation between lecturers and students in HEIs. The research questions in this study are thus:

RQ1: What are lecturers' perceptions of creating podcasts and vodcasts to teach academic writing skills?

RQ2: What are students' perceptions of utilising podcasts and vodcasts?

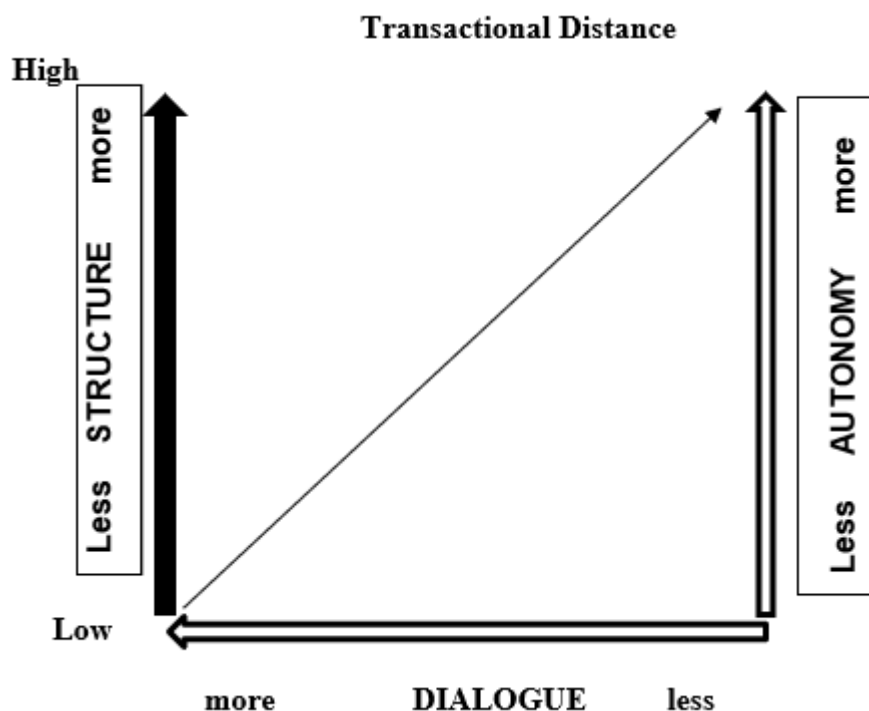


Figure 1. Moore's theory of transactional distance

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study's focus was in line with a qualitative phenomenological approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Ellis, 2018) since it enabled the researchers to comprehend both lecturers' and students' perceptions to understand how lecturers create podcasts and vodcasts and how they are received by students. This exploratory study gathered background information from the literature, which was then used to corroborate the findings from the participants. An ODeL university in South Africa is the context of this study and an online method of delivery is the norm. The institution is one of the largest distance-learning universities in Africa, with more than 400,000 students enrolled from more than 136 countries. The academic context of this article is an undergraduate English Academic Writing module. Approximately 16,000 students register for the ENG321 module (pseudonym) each semester. The module is intended for first-year students who are native English speakers. However, English is a second language for most of the students enrolled in the module. Because the pass rate for the ENG321 module has not exceeded 75% during the past five years, it is regarded as a high-risk module. To overcome the distance factor and feelings of isolation that can arise in distance education, it is necessary to investigate lecturers' and students' perceptions of creating and utilising podcasts and vodcasts to improve the academic writing skills of first-year students in an ODeL institution.

Data were collected in July 2022, at the end of the first semester. Ten students and all ten lecturers from the ENG321 module team were invited to be part of the study. The participants were first-year South African students who speak English as an additional language. The student participants comprised a mix of male and female participants. Similarly, the lecturer participants were a mix of males and females and were both English as an additional language and English native language speakers. All lecturers had more than five years of teaching experience. The lecturers and students were made aware that they could take part in the study or opt out at any time. The students were sampled randomly for the study, and they are referred to as Students 1, 2, 3, and so on. The lecturers, who were purposefully sampled, are known as Lecturers 1, 2, 3, and so on. To determine the lecturers' perceptions of podcasts and vodcasts, an email interview was distributed to gather the necessary data. The researchers received only five email interview responses from the ten lecturers. Similarly, the students were invited via the module's Telegram group to a Microsoft Teams meeting with the researchers. Of the ten students who were invited to take part in the focus group, only six participated in the study. These figures are appropriate

given that qualitative research seeks to understand the experiences of a small number of participants. The data were then transcribed and thematic analysis was utilised to develop themes related to the research questions as the data were being analysed (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Transactional distance theory (Moore, 1993) is the broad pedagogical framework used in this article that assisted the researchers in analysing the data.

### 3. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The main findings are given in this section after being divided into themes that respond to each of the research questions. To understand how lecturers perceive the creation of podcasts and vodcasts and how students perceive their utilisation, the following two themes emerged:

- Lecturers' perceptions of creating podcasts and vodcasts to teach academic writing skills; and,
- Students' perceptions of utilising podcasts and vodcasts.

#### **Lecturers' perceptions of creating podcasts and vodcasts to teach academic writing skills**

Lecturers are at the forefront of teaching and learning. It is therefore essential to consider their perceptions of creating podcasts and vodcasts to teach academic writing as their views may help lessen technological challenges, fear of technology and encourage technophobes to interact with technology for the benefit of their students. On this basis, semi-structured interview questions were sent to the lecturers by email to answer the first research question [What are your perceptions of creating podcasts and vodcasts to teach academic writing skills?]. The researcher analysed five purposively sampled email interview responses by lecturers. Their verbatim responses are presented below:

*"I love experimenting with e-Learning tools because we are instructing students who are digital natives, and they respond well to technology! Gone are the days when we are teaching with boring textbooks and all text. I enjoyed creating the podcasts and vodcasts especially because I am also an audio-visual learner, like many students. I always imagine, how would I like to learn this ... for me, podcasts and vodcasts is a wonderful way to make learning easier. I think that as lecturers, we need to move away from the we were taught many years ago and keep adapting to technological changes." (Lecturer 1)*

*"I was hesitant to create the podcasts and vodcasts and I even tried to avoid doing so but with constant force of the primary lecturer, I eventually created the podcasts and vodcasts and I was glad to help students in some way. I think for me, there was a fear of doing it wrong and a fear of confusing students as we did the podcasts and vodcasts alone. I did have challenges creating the podcasts as I was not familiar with creating a podcast and then a vodcast. It was a learning experience for me. But look, the students seemed to enjoy it and they learnt content in so many ways." (Lecturer 2)*

*"The fact that we repeatedly taught the same aspect through vodcasts and podcasts, helped students to enhance their writing. Many students openly discussed how these resources had a positive effect on their work. Many students who repeated the module more than once successfully finished the module, probably due to the implementation of podcasts and vodcasts. By providing a choice of resources for students to pick from, we can see the fact that each student is unique and has a unique preference." (Lecturer 3)*

*"Recording podcasts and vodcasts was enjoyable. However, I had to be in a silent place to avoid background sound. Also, I was challenged by the module content because I had to simplify it and present it in a manner that would be easily understood. I had to rehearse and practise over and over till I got the message and presentation right. Podcasts and vodcasts are futuristic and the choice of having both was exhilarating for me because I knew that my students would benefit tremendously from the supplemental tools." (Lecturer 4)*

*"I did not want to take part in the creation of podcasts and vodcasts as I do not see the need for repetition of content. The students have access to study guides, tutorial letters and we do livestream with them. With our heavy workloads, I do not see why we should be repeating content, especially because students are in university now and they should be more independent." (Lecturer 5)*

Five lecturers thus shared their perceptions of creating podcasts and vodcasts to teach academic writing skills to first-year students. A majority of the responses (four out of five) indicated a positive perception of podcast and vodcast creation. The lecturers indicated the essentiality of implementing multimedia tools in teaching and learning as their current cohort of students consume digital content, are digital natives, enjoy the use of technology and are adept at navigating online learning. In addition, the lecturers indicated that podcasts and vodcasts are futuristic and exhilarating and that they enjoyed producing quality content knowledge. Lastly, podcasts and vodcasts afford students a sense of choice and appeal to various learning styles and their uniqueness. Students who are more inclined toward auditory learning may enjoy listening to podcasts, whereas students who are more visually inclined may prefer vodcasts. It was interesting that one of the lecturers did not see the need to create podcasts and vodcasts as it was a strain on his workload and was perceived to be a repetition of content knowledge. Lecturer 5 further added that university students should be independent learners (active participants) in their learning and not rely on supplemental learning tools to develop academic rigour.

From the findings above, most lecturers enjoyed creating podcasts and vodcasts as they were able to disseminate the module content to students through audio and audio-visual platforms. One lecturer perceived podcasts and vodcasts as futuristic and as affording students a sense of choice and appealing to their various learning styles (Lecturer 2). This finding corroborates recent studies by Shimshon-Santo (2021), Schaefer and Lowe (2021), Gonulal (2021), Bashshur, Doarn, Frenk, Kvedar, and Woolliscroft (2020), and Faramarzi, Tabrizi, and Chalak (2019) in the sense that podcasts and vodcasts meet the needs of students with a variety of learning styles and are thus effective in enhancing engagement, reflection and motivation. In addition, another lecturer admitted to fearing the use of technology [technophobe] and did not want to come across as confusing to students. However, Lecturer 2 challenged herself and recorded podcasts and vodcasts that were well received by students. This is in line with the findings reported by Roy and Srivastava (2021), who argued that the digital divide between lectures and students remains a serious issue. From a transactional distance perspective (Moore, 1993; Zhang, 2003), if lecturers are not willing to embrace the use of technology in their pedagogies, then the transactional distance between lecturers and students will widen. The researchers found that Lecturers 3 and 5 had contradictory perceptions about creating podcasts and vodcasts. Lecturer 3 appreciated the idea of repeating the module's content in podcasts and vodcasts as students needed to hear and see their content knowledge presented in various ways with different lecturers' voices. Figure 2 shows that in transactional distance terms, an increase in lecturer dialogue decreases student autonomy and would reduce the transactional distance in the module (Moore, 1993; Swart & Macleod, 2021; Zhang, 2003). However, Lecturer 5 did not see the need for repetition as, according to him, university students should be active participants who are independent in their learning. This would arguably increase transactional distance in the module as dialogue would be decreased and student autonomy would increase (see Figure 1).

### **Students' perceptions of utilising podcasts and vodcasts**

A focus group interview with six students was conducted through the Microsoft Teams meeting platform. Students were asked about their perceptions of utilising podcasts and vodcasts in the ENG321 module. The students' verbatim responses are presented below:

*"I find podcasts and vodcasts easily accessible; they are easy to understand, and they are useful. I do feel they are time demanding; they need special time as you cannot listen to them anywhere. You need to be in a noise-free area so you can hear them properly; you cannot ask questions if you have after listening." (Student 1)*

*"I loved both tools and I got feedback from lecturers about how to approach certain topics. They are always available to go back and check information if you're confused. They are extremely helpful with regards to assignments. I just find that they are very time-consuming." (Student 2)*

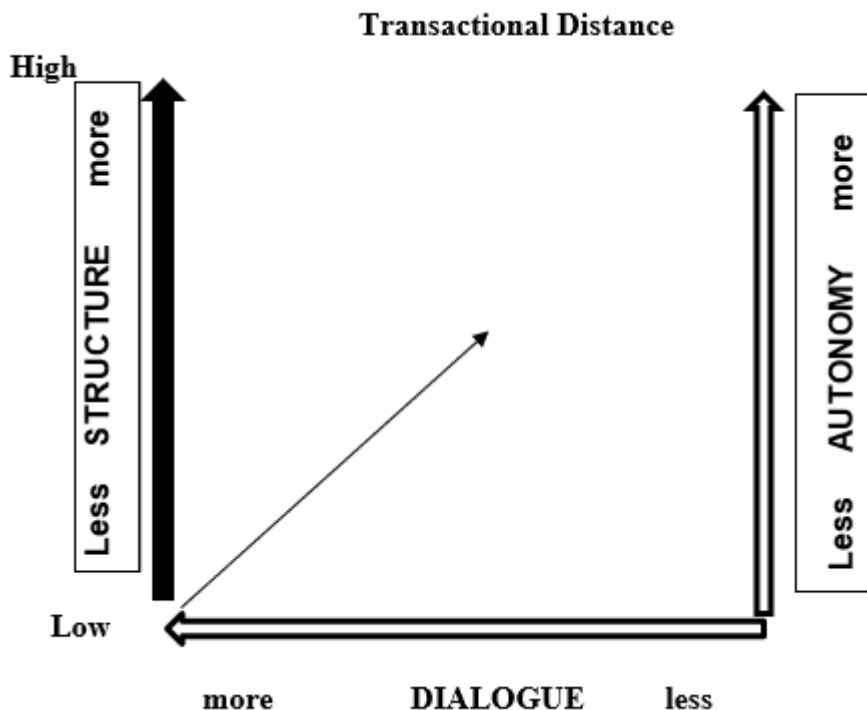


Figure 2. A decrease in Moore's theory of transactional distance

*"I loved that they have improved listening skills. You need to be a fast learner to engage with these resources. The negative part is that I do not have time to ask questions as we just listen to the lecturers." (Student 3)*

*"The positive perceptions are that when you are using podcasts and vodcasts you can gain listening skills, you can access it at any time even after the actual time and understand better. The negative perceptions can be the bad connection between the internet, the insufficient data, and the lack of communication." (Student 4)*

*"Podcasts were found to be motivating since they used students to gain more focus on the content of the podcasts. Second, podcasts were also found to be interesting learning media because students were never exposed with them in the classroom. Third, podcasts were considered to create an enjoyable learning environment because the activity in the classroom was not only reading but also listening. Is time-consuming, not searchable, accessibility problems and limited audience. Podcast consumes a lot of time especially if the file is larger. It is not easy to search in podcasting." (Student 5)*

*"Firstly, podcasts are easily accessible on the dedicated portal or site. Secondly, they allow individual time management, and, lastly, the individual may pause and replay the audio over and over should the need arise. Meanwhile, with vodcasts, presentations are clear. Moreover, examples and illustrations provided via slides, make it better to easily understand the content. Although, many find it to be easily accessible, less time-consuming, and time management efficient. The technological effects such as data consumption, load-shedding, and poor network signals tend to negatively affect the perception intended." (Student 6)*



The views above demonstrate the students' verbatim responses from the focus group interview. The majority of the students' responses are significantly balanced concerning positive and negative perceptions of the supplemental learning tools. The students indicated that podcasts and vodcasts are accessible and were helpful in terms of improving their understanding of the content and listening skills. The students found them enjoyable while they also encouraged focus and time management and enabled them to pause and replay the multimedia files to verify information or gain further knowledge about misunderstood content. In contrast, the students expressed that they found the podcasts and vodcasts time-consuming, they needed to be listened to in a noise-free environment, and they were unable to ask questions while engaging with them asynchronously. There were also issues with poor internet connections, insufficient data, and electricity outages (load-shedding in South Africa), while some students had accessibility challenges as they may not have had a device on which to listen to and/or watch a podcast and/or vodcast.

From the findings above, most of the students found podcasts and vodcasts accessible as they did not experience any technical challenges when downloading the multimedia files. According to Students 1 and 2, podcasts and vodcasts are helpful as students can revisit multimedia files to verify information that they were previously confused about [misunderstood]. In addition, Students 3 and 4 revealed that podcasts and vodcasts improve listening skills, which helped in better understanding the module content. This finding corroborates recent studies by Oliinyk, Gaman, Chaikovska, Bezzubova, and Paustovska (2022), Yeganeh and Izadpanah (2021), Vergara (2022), and Yiemkuntitavorn and Rattanapan (2021) in that podcasts and vodcasts are accessible, assist in understanding the module content and attentive listening is essential. From a transactional distance perspective (Moore, 1993; Zhang, 2003), the accessibility of podcasts and vodcasts facilitates learning, is helpful and improves students' listening skills, thereby reducing the transactional distance between lecturers and students (see Figure 1) as the course design accommodates flexibility through communications media and students' autonomy is not compromised by the use of podcasts and vodcasts in teaching and learning. In addition, the researcher found that while Students 5 and 6 enjoyed the use of podcasts and vodcasts, reported that the multimedia files ignited interest in learning with the use of technology, appreciated the pause and replay feature and that podcasts and vodcasts used clear illustrations to foster a better understanding of the module content, poor network signals, load-shedding and data consumption tempered the positive perception of podcasts and vodcasts. This clearly indicates that lack of data, poor network coverage and load-shedding widens the transactional distance (see Figure 2) introduced by Moore (1993) and Zhang (2003). However, it is essential to point out that UniX (pseudonym) provides students with data on a monthly basis for academic purposes and that load-shedding affects all sectors [Education, Corporate, Manufacturing, Farming, Arts etc.]. Load-shedding leads to poor network coverage and is a national crisis requiring urgent attention. Lastly, Student 5 indicated that podcasts and vodcasts do not assist in terms of research. It is important to highlight that podcasts and vodcasts are not meant for research purposes but as supplemental tools to enhance academic writing skills.

In terms of the limitations of this study, it included only one South African distance education university; therefore, the conclusions may apply solely to that institution or other distance education universities. The study was also conducted in one large module with 16,000 students; however, the limited voices that appear in this article may represent a larger population of students. The participants were not forced to participate in the study, and they were made aware that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. All COVID-19 regulations were followed. The ethical clearance number for the study is NHREC (National Health Research Ethics Council) Registration #: Rec-240816-052.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This article has particularly highlighted the significance of using podcasts and vodcasts as supplemental tools in the teaching and learning of an academic writing module in a distance HEI. The majority of the students indicated a positive perception towards the incorporation of podcasts and vodcasts in teaching and learning. While a majority of the lecturers also indicated a positive perception of incorporating podcasts and vodcasts, a few novice lecturers initially indicated reluctance as they lacked confidence [felt insecure] in themselves and were unfamiliar with podcasting and vodcasting. Nevertheless, the lecturers recorded quality podcasts and vodcasts and received positive feedback and appreciation from students. In summary, the implementation of podcasts and vodcasts in teaching and learning is beneficial and positive experiences were revealed by both students and lecturers.

Technology is no longer a choice in HEIs; the pandemic and post-pandemic era have made its use compulsory in these settings. However, it must be noted that podcasts and vodcasts are not a panacea for student success. As with other multimedia digital tools, there are challenges related to podcasting and vodcasting. The researchers recommend that language lecturers become more selective in creating podcasts and vodcasts with interesting content for their students. Lecturers should learn about and consider their students' interests, motivations, language and demographic backgrounds. The length and style of podcasts and vodcasts should be appropriate to ensure they are simultaneously meaningful and attract students' attention. There is a greater need for a digitally literate e-learning society and a greater need for e-inclusion in academia, especially in HEIs. Lecturers and institutions should collaborate with stakeholders in other universities across the world to reduce the digital divide between lecturers and students. Lecturers should have a positive outlook and acceptance towards e-learning technologies to ensure greater efficiency in accessing global knowledge for cognition assimilation.

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