



Advancing first-year academic writing via podcasts, vodcasts and support initiatives

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ABSTRACT

Academic writing remains a significant challenge for many first-year students in open distance and e-learning contexts within large enrolment modules. This study investigates the underlying causes of these challenges and evaluates the effectiveness of targeted, technology-mediated support interventions. Following the assessment and moderation of the first assignment in a first-year academic writing module, key areas of difficulty were identified, prompting the use of an online evaluation questionnaire to explore students' experiences. Guided by transactional distance theory, the study aims to reduce students' sense of isolation and enhance engagement through the integration of podcasts and vodcasts. A qualitative research design was employed, drawing on data from the questionnaire and document analysis of second assignment and take-home examination scripts. The findings indicate measurable improvements in students' academic writing skills, including the construction of logical arguments, effective use of discourse markers for cohesion, structured paragraphing, paraphrasing, and the development of an academic voice. Improvements in citation practices, referencing accuracy, and language use were also observed. However, persistent challenges such as plagiarism and limited utilization of learning resources remained. This study contributes to digital pedagogy by demonstrating the value of multimedia interventions in enhancing academic literacy in online distance environments.

Keywords: academic writing challenges of first-year students, online evaluation questionnaires, podcasts, student support, vodcasts

INTRODUCTION

Enhanced academic writing skills are crucial in distance higher education (HE) institutions as they play a pivotal role in enabling students' academic success through the development of analytical, interpretative, and argumentative abilities (Gamlath, 2022; Hooda et al., 2022; Mohale, 2023; Moussa & Ali, 2022). UNIX-O (pseudonym), an open distance e-learning (ODEL) mega institution in South Africa, enrolls approximately 18,000 first-year students per semester in its academic writing module (AWM101–pseudonym). AWM101 is a first-year module at national qualification framework level 5, designed to develop essential academic skills such as critical reading and critical writing while enhancing students' academic English competence. The module's objectives require students to produce well-structured, cohesive, and academically appropriate texts that adhere to established academic writing standards (Ndlangamandla et al., 2024). The AWM101 first-years students use English as an additional language (EAL), which presents a significant challenge, given that English is the medium of instruction (Mol) in South African HE. Bolton et al. (2023), Hassan et al. (2021), and Kelly and Hou (2022) maintain that the use of English as Mol poses significant comprehension challenges for first-year students. These challenges include language barriers, grammatical difficulties, cultural differences, and the struggle to adapt to the academic environment, where proficiency in English is a prerequisite.

Despite the challenges exacerbated by Mol, according to Khadawardi (2022), Mbambo-Thata (2020), Osabwa (2022), and Wong and Chapman (2023), first-year students encounter significant academic

challenges, such as analyzing academic texts and effectively translating their ideas into coherent written forms. Specifically, these challenges include expressing ideas clearly, accurately paraphrasing and summarizing, mastering grammar, expanding vocabulary, referencing correctly, and constructing well-formed sentences. Based on the assessment and moderation of the AWM101 module, the academic writing challenges observed among students are consistent with those reported by Sevnarayan and Mohale (2022), Mohale (2025), and Maphoto (2022). These challenges stem from inadequate writing skills developed during high school, the need to adapt to HE's academic writing standards, and limited language proficiency, mainly among students who speak EAL (Hassan et al., 2021; Lentz & Foncha, 2021). The impact of these challenges is significant, contributing to higher dropout rates, increased failure rates, and delays in completing qualifications. Common issues include difficulties with citation and referencing, developing an academic voice, producing appropriate academic texts, paraphrasing, summarizing, and adhering to academic writing conventions (Mendoza et al., 2022; Nenotek et al., 2022; Wang & Xie, 2022).

An additional challenge faced by AWM101 students is the nature of UNIX-O as an ODeL institution. The lack of face-to-face interaction and limited in-person engagement can aggravate feelings of isolation and loneliness, making it even more difficult for first-year students to acquire essential academic writing skills. Podcasts and vodcasts were introduced by the researcher as a means of mitigating transactional distance. According to Crofts et al. (2005, p. 1), the term 'podcast' refers to digitally compressed multimedia audio files that can be downloaded and played on personal devices. Podcasts are used in educational settings to bridge the transactional gap (Rajar, 2020; Rime et al., 2022). On the other hand, Kay (2012) defines vodcasts as digital video files. Vodcasts serve as the visual counterpart to podcasts (Gerber, 2022; Suroviec, 2023). The AWM101 module included three key assessments: two assignments and a take-home examination. Despite the preparatory support provided, student performance on the first assignment was suboptimal. Marking and moderation revealed significant academic gaps among students. To address these issues, an online evaluation questionnaire was introduced within the Moodle AWM101 learning management system (LMS) to identify academic challenges and potential sources of difficulty. The information and communications technology (ICT) department assisted in distributing the questionnaire, as well as retrieving assignment and take-home examination scripts, ensuring compliance with institutional ethical requirements. These scripts were also analyzed for document analysis purposes to provide further insights into students' academic writing performance. The research questions (RQs) guiding this study are as follows:

1. **RQ1.** What specific academic writing challenges did you encounter in your first AWM101 assignment?
2. **RQ2.** How do students' academic writing skills show ongoing improvement across the second assignment and the take-home examination scripts following the introduction of the online evaluation questionnaire, podcasts, and vodcasts as supplemental support tools?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Students in ODeL institutions face diverse academic writing challenges, including lack of voice, incomplete sentences, grammar errors, citation and referencing issues, limited argumentative skills, poor coherence, and recurring spelling mistakes (Crossley & Kim, 2022; Patty, 2024; Sarwat et al., 2021; Yan, 2024). These challenges often stem from prior educational backgrounds (Dolasinski & Reynolds, 2023; Eynon & Gambino, 2023), require proactive academic support interventions from lecturers. Simply blaming students' high school backgrounds does little to address these issues (Alostath, 2021; Hassan et al., 2021). Instead, lecturers ought to strive to identify and understand the root causes by paying attention and engaging in students' experiences and perspectives. To address widespread underperformance in the AWM101 module's first assignment, an online evaluation questionnaire was implemented with the ICT department assisting in distributing the questionnaire. This tool was designed to diagnose and better understand students' specific academic writing challenges. Online evaluation questionnaires have proven effective in helping first-year students identify their strengths and weaknesses (Maphoto, 2024). This approach aligns with the view that literacy is shaped by sociocultural environments, rather than being merely technical (Baker & Street, 1994). The AWM101 online evaluation questionnaire used clear and simple English to ensure accessibility and accurately identify students' challenges. When combined with reflective practices, as well as podcasts and vodcasts, such tools create a comprehensive framework that strengthen success in academic writing.

Today's students are tech-savvy and actively embrace and use multimedia platforms like TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat (McWhirter, 2024; Wang & Ibrahim, 2024; Williams, 2024). In academia, podcasts and vodcasts have become essential supplemental tools for enhancing first-year students' academic writing skills (Carson, 2024; Mohale, 2025; Sullivan, 2019). These multimedia tools provide dynamic learning experiences, catering to both audio and visual learners and accommodating diverse learning styles (Cabual, 2021; Kiberg & Spilker, 2023). Podcasts and vodcasts offer several benefits: they make complex writing concepts easier to understand, provide flexible and accessible learning, and are especially appealing to tech-savvy students. Additionally, they encourage active engagement and improve comprehension. Moore (2024) highlights their effectiveness in demonstrating practical writing techniques, where combining visual aids with verbal explanations enhances learning outcomes by addressing multiple cognitive channels. For first-year students in modules like AWA101, podcasts and vodcasts act as step-by-step guides to mastering academic writing, allowing students to revisit content at their own pace. Furthermore, these supplemental tools offer a personalized and interactive learning experience, promoting better retention of writing skills (Pettit et al., 2017).

The integration of technology in ODeL has greatly improved student support by making it accessible to remote learners. Griffith and Sweet (2022) and Johnston et al. (2021) highlight that podcasts and vodcasts provide flexible solutions that bridge the gap between lecturers and students. First-year students often struggle with adjusting to new academic standards and managing their time effectively. Online tools like podcasts and vodcasts are designed to address these challenges by presenting tailored support (Gautam, 2025; Lizcano et al., 2020). Academic support for AWM101 students addressed their specific concerns effectively through short, impactful 15-minute podcasts and vodcasts. These resources created an engaging online learning environment that catered to diverse writing styles without overwhelming students. This approach aligns with the findings of Dewi (2024) and Emma (2024), who maintain that in academic support, less is often more. When used effectively, supplemental tools can interactively engage students, ensuring both accessibility and relevance. Despite their pedagogical value, podcasts and vodcasts present notable limitations and criticisms in ODeL institutions. Admiraal (2022), Newman et al. (2021), and Hall and Jones (2023) argue that producing high-quality podcasts and vodcasts is time-intensive and technically demanding, increasing lecturers' workload and raising sustainability concerns. Access inequalities further constrain effectiveness, as Fadilah et al. (2017), Gikas and Grant (2013), and Gunderson and Cumming (2023) report that many students lack reliable internet connectivity, sufficient data, or compatible devices, limiting epistemological access. Modality-specific challenges are also evident: Nadhianty and Purnomo (2020) note that audio-only podcasts may hinder comprehension due to the absence of visual cues, while Mulki and Ormsby (2022) highlight the high data demands of vodcasts. In addition, Noetel et al. (2021) and Yumnam (2021) observe that asynchronous delivery may delay feedback and reduce interaction. Evans and Robertson (2020) and Brown (2018) further identify uneven digital competencies and resistance to technological change. Besser et al. (2022), Serhan (2020), and Fawaz and Samaha (2021) document burnout, anxiety, and isolation associated with sustained digital teaching. To address this issue, resources were optimized for the Moodle LMS platform, featuring small file sizes and compatibility with personal devices to avoid space issues. This approach ensured that the tools remained both effective and accessible, thereby enhancing academic support. Lee (2020) and Strielkowski (2020) emphasize the critical importance of academic support that aligns with the needs of today's virtual student cohort. The integration of podcasts and vodcasts in distance education not only creates engagement but also enhances academic writing skills while promoting inclusivity and accessibility.

Research Context

This study explores how multimedia tools like online evaluation questionnaire, podcasts, and vodcasts can assist first-year students improve their academic writing skills at UNIX-O, an ODeL institution. It focuses on addressing the challenges of the ODeL environment by tailoring support to the needs of AMW101 students. Using podcasts and vodcasts as supplemental tools, the study tackles writing challenges and promotes accessible learning strategies. The study also examines how these tools can improve academic writing in ODeL settings. The findings aim to enhance academic writing support systems at UNIX-O and advance writing practices in similar educational contexts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts Moore's (1973, 1997) transactional distance theory and Moore and Kearsley's (1996) framework as a lens to understand the dynamics of distance learning. This theory emphasizes the interactions between individuals and their environment, focusing on the communicative gaps and potential misunderstandings that arise due to the separation between lecturers and students. Addressing these gaps, the theory aims to reduce isolation and create interactive learning spaces. Transactional distance theory goes beyond mere geographical separation. It highlights the pedagogical challenges inherent in the relationships between students and lecturers, which are shaped by space and time. As Moore (1997) explains, this separation can significantly affect the teaching and learning processes, introducing unique complexities in DE. This study focuses on UNIX-O students enrolled in the AWM101 module at an ODeL institution. Many first-year students face challenges in developing academic writing skills, which often require tailored interventions. To address these challenges, this study explores the potential of podcasts and vodcasts as tools to enhance academic writing skills. These multimedia interventions are examined within the context of the unique dynamics of ODeL, and the challenges posed by transactional distance. The goal is to reduce the effects of separation and improve the teaching and learning experience.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach and Design

This qualitative study investigates the academic writing challenges encountered in the AWM101 module and examines the impact of targeted supplemental support tools on students' performance. The study employed a two-cycle action research design, grounded in iterative reflection and systematic intervention, to address the RQs:

- (1) the specific academic writing challenges students faced in their first assignment and the type of support that could enhance performance and
- (2) the improvements in writing skills observed in subsequent assignments and the take-home examination following the introduction of online evaluation questionnaires, podcasts, and vodcasts.

Each cycle followed the action research phases of planning, action, observation, and reflection, enabling a structured and responsive approach. In cycle 1, the planning phase involved identifying students' challenges in the first assignment through analysis of their scripts and baseline feedback. The action phase introduced initial support strategies, including basic scaffolds and guidance for engagement with multimedia tools. During the observation phase, data were collected through student assignment scripts, reflective notes, and engagement monitoring, while the reflection phase highlighted areas requiring additional support, particularly clarity in scaffolding and integration of multimedia resources. This cycle directly addressed **RQ1**, pinpointing challenges and identifying the types of academic support needed. Cycle 2 built upon insights from the first cycle, introducing targeted modifications to refine teaching strategies and enhance learning outcomes. The planning phase involved designing interventions that integrated online evaluation questionnaires, podcasts, and vodcasts as supplemental tools. The action phase implemented these strategies, and the observation phase captured students' second assignment and take-home examination scripts, engagement patterns, and reflective feedback. The reflection phase compared performance across the two cycles, highlighting improvements in writing structure, argument development, and independent learning. This iterative cycle directly addressed **RQ2**, demonstrating measurable improvements in academic writing skills and confirming the effectiveness of the multimedia-supported interventions. Through these two iterative cycles, the study not only identified the challenges students initially faced but also demonstrated progressive improvements in writing skills, showing how targeted, evidence-based interventions can enhance academic performance. The cycles' design ensured that interventions were responsive, iterative, and grounded in student needs, generating robust insights into the efficacy of multimedia support tools for improving academic writing in the AWM101 module.

Data Collection Methods

This study employed two complementary research instruments: the online evaluation questionnaire and document analysis. According to Lee et al. (2022), Heil and Ifenthaler (2023), and Yıldız and Çakmak (2023), the online evaluation questionnaire is a systematic method for collecting information about students and their interaction with electronic technology. In this study, the questionnaire included both closed-ended questions, such as Likert-scale items measuring engagement and satisfaction, and open-ended questions, which allowed participants to describe their specific academic writing challenges and suggest types of support that would have improved their performance. Reliability was enhanced through pilot testing with a small sample of students, and content validity was ensured by aligning all questions with the research objectives and relevant literature on academic writing support. This instrument provided real-time, interactive feedback, enabling participants to share their experiences freely, thereby directly addressing **RQ1**. In contrast, document analysis, as described by Bowen (2009, p. 27) and Wilkinson and Dokter (2023), involves a systematic review of printed and electronic materials to interpret and extract meaningful insights. In this study, scripts were selected based on specific inclusion criteria, including the first and second assignment scripts as well as take-home examination scripts from the same cohort, ensuring that student progression could be accurately tracked. The analysis was conducted systematically through thematic coding, focusing on the development of writing skills, structure, argumentation, and adherence to academic conventions. Corbin and Strauss (2008) emphasize the value of document analysis in generating empirical knowledge by exploring the context, voice, and meaning embedded within documents. This approach addressed **RQ2** by enabling a reflective and comprehensive examination of students' academic writing development over time. Together, these instruments provided both real-time, participant-centered insights and systematic, reflective analysis, allowing the study to explore the complexities of students' experiences and the challenges they face in academic writing, while evaluating the effectiveness of the introduced support tools.

Population and Sampling

According to Johnson et al. (2022) a population refers to the broader group from which participants are drawn, whereas a sample is a smaller, purposefully selected subset (Kenton, 2019). In this study, the research population comprised approximately 18,000 students registered for the AWM101 module during the first semester of 2024. Given the qualitative focus of the study, which aimed to explore in depth how interventions influenced student writing development, a smaller, purposeful sample was appropriate. Consistent with Ryan and Bernard (2000) and Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame (1981), qualitative studies can generate meaningful insights with 10-36 participants. Accordingly, a purposeful sample of 10 students was selected, representing non-native English speakers from disadvantaged backgrounds with limited access to reliable internet infrastructure, who were the first in their families to attend university. This approach allowed for a detailed, contextual understanding of student experiences while remaining manageable for in-depth document analysis. For document analysis, five second-assignment scripts and five take-home examination scripts were purposefully selected to capture variation in student performance. This small but targeted sample enabled identification of patterns of improvement and meaningful insights regarding engagement with the interventions, emphasizing depth, richness, and contextual understanding, which are central to qualitative research.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the online evaluation questionnaire and document analysis were transcribed and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2012, p. 2) six-phase thematic analysis approach. This method was selected for its systematic yet flexible structure, which enables rigorous identification, organization, and interpretation of patterns across qualitative datasets. To further enhance analytical rigor and transparency, the analysis was guided by the frameworks proposed by Burns and Grove (2009) and De Vos et al. (2005), which emphasize the systematic structuring, synthesis, and interpretation of qualitative data. Braun and Clarke's (2012) six-phase thematic analysis procedure guided the entire analytic process, ensuring consistency and transparency across all stages of analysis. The six phases include data familiarization, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report, were

Table 1. Six-step thematic analysis procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 2)

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

applied iteratively to both questionnaire responses and assessment scripts. The application of these phases is summarized in **Table 1**, which outlines the procedures followed at each stage of the analysis.

The findings of the study were analyzed through the systematic application of this six-phase framework, providing a clear and coherent structure for coding, interpreting, and presenting the data. This structured approach enabled a comprehensive exploration of recurring patterns and themes and formed a sound basis for analyzing and interpreting findings within the ODeL context. The themes generated through this process informed the interpretation of students' academic writing experiences and engagement with the pedagogical interventions. The research instruments employed in this study were designed to address complementary aspects of the research inquiry. Pre-established questions guided each instrument to ensure consistency and comparability across data sources. The integration of questionnaire data and document analysis enabled triangulation, thereby strengthening the coherence and credibility of the findings and allowing for a detailed examination of the challenges encountered by AWM101 students in developing academic writing skills. Trustworthiness was ensured through multiple strategies embedded throughout the analytic process. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the data, iterative reading and re-reading during the familiarization phase, and continuous refinement of codes and themes across data sources. Dependability was supported by the use of a clearly documented six-phase analytic procedure, which created a transparent audit trail of analytic decisions. Confirmability was enhanced by grounding interpretations directly in the data through systematic coding, theme review, and the use of verbatim extracts to support analytic claims.

The same researcher who designed and implemented the pedagogical interventions also conducted the data analysis. To minimize potential researcher bias associated with this dual role, data analysis commenced only after the completion of the interventions, thereby separating instructional involvement from the analytic phase. Reflexive engagement was maintained throughout the analysis, with analytic decisions continuously checked against the raw data and the study's theoretical framework. The use of multiple data sources further strengthened the credibility and consistency of the findings. The application of thematic analysis was aligned with transactional distance theory (Moore, 1973), enabling a theoretically informed interpretation of students' academic writing experiences in the ODeL environment. Themes were systematically developed, reviewed, and refined to ensure coherence, internal consistency, and alignment with the study's objectives. This structured, transparent, and reflexive analytic process ensured that the findings provide a rigorous, credible, and trustworthy account of academic writing development within the ODeL context.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings in this section are derived from **RQ1** and **RQ2** of the study. The themes that emerged from the online evaluation questionnaires and document analysis include:

- Complex academic writing challenges encountered and
- Ongoing improvement in academic writing skills.

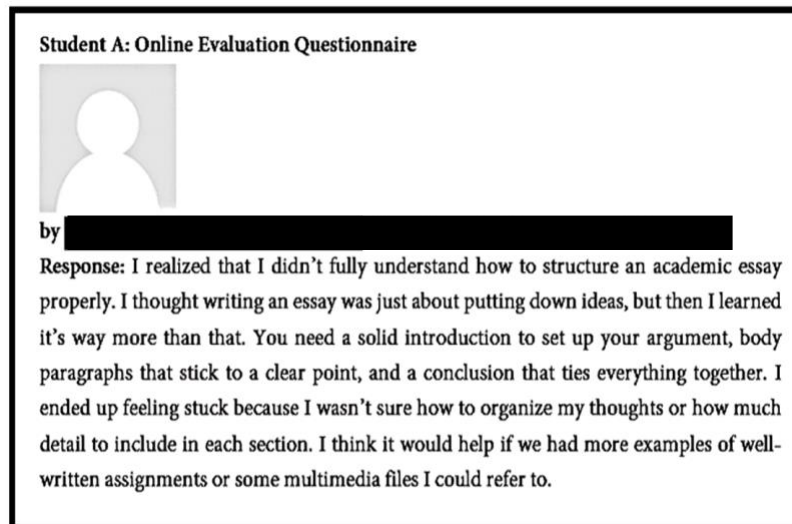


Figure 1. Student A's response (Source: Student A: Online Evaluation Questionnaire, RQ1-2024)

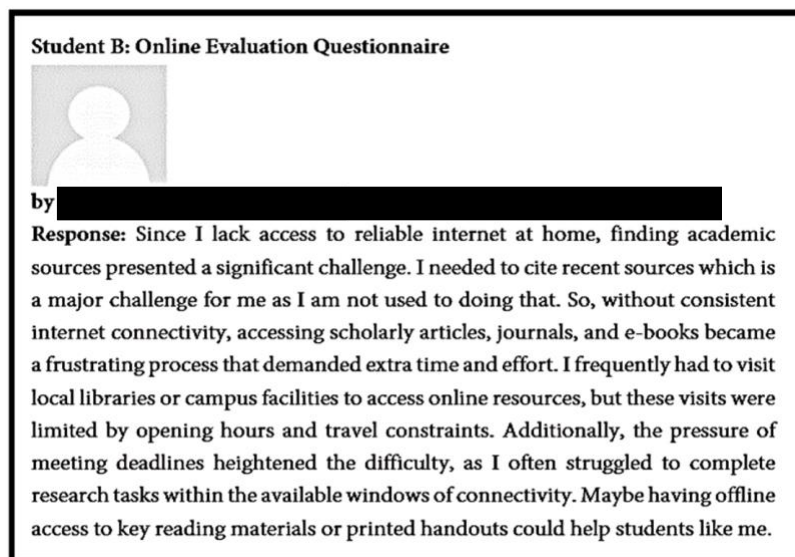


Figure 2. Student B's response (Source: Student B: Online Evaluation Questionnaire, RQ1-2024)

Complex Academic Writing Challenges Encountered

Academic writing challenges faced by first-year students vary and are often influenced by their specific contexts and individual needs. Without well-developed academic writing skills, students may struggle to achieve their desired academic outcomes. The online evaluation questionnaire was used to gather data. 10 students' online evaluation questionnaire were purposively sampled used for this study. Below are screenshots of students' responses.

Student A identified a lack of understanding of academic essay structure as the main challenge. Proper planning [mind-mapping] is necessary to organize and argue ideas effectively. Additionally, having access to well-written essay samples and implementing multimedia resources would be beneficial (**Figure 1**).

Student B highlighted that limited access to the internet is a major challenge, particularly when it comes to finding academic sources for citation and referencing. Besides, citation and referencing remain significant hurdles. Access to offline materials, such as handouts on citations and references, would be beneficial (**Figure 2**).

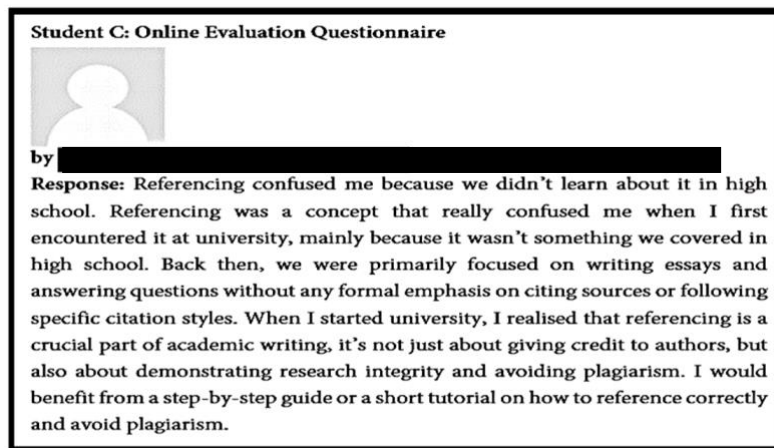


Figure 3. Student C's response (Source: Student C: Online Evaluation Questionnaire, RQ1-2024)

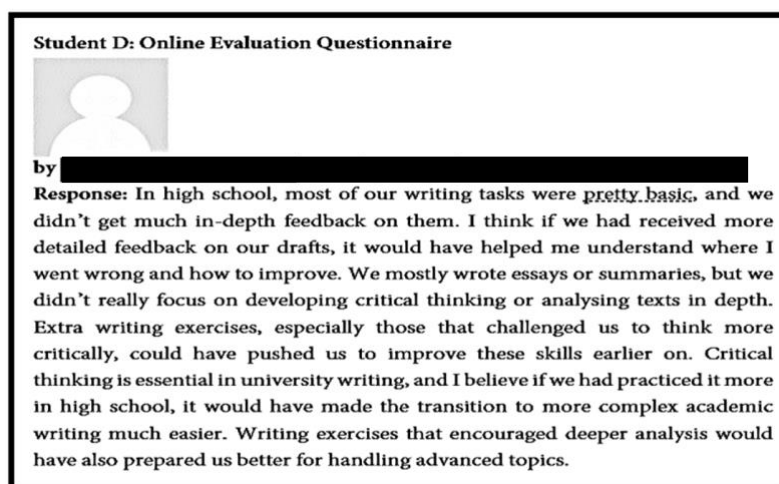


Figure 4. Student D's response (Source: Student D: Online Evaluation Questionnaire, RQ1-2024)

Student C disclosed that citation and referencing are challenging skills, as they were not adequately developed in high school. A step-by-step guide or a short tutorial would be helpful in addressing this challenge (**Figure 3**).

Student D revealed that the lack of explicit marking and detailed feedback on assessments is disempowering, as not knowing which areas need improvement is detrimental. Critical thinking and in-depth text analysis are major challenges. However, practical writing exercises would help develop deeper analytical skills (**Figure 4**).

Student E indicated that their mastery of English is limited, making articulation and expression a significant challenge. However, language support intervention focused on academic writing would be highly beneficial (**Figure 5**).

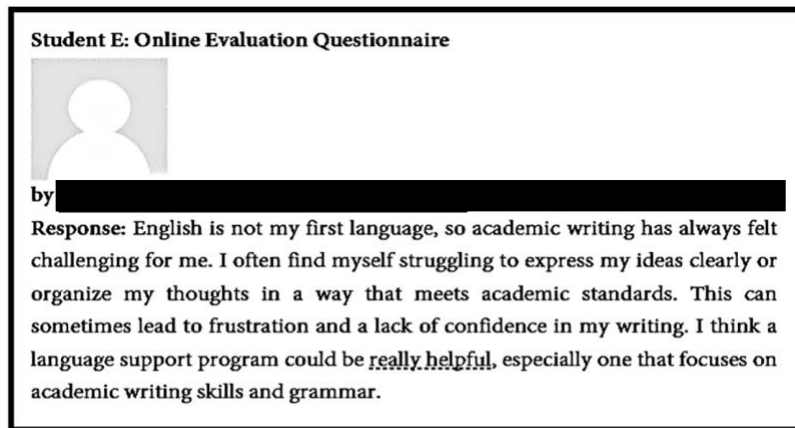


Figure 5. Student E's response (Source: Student E: Online Evaluation Questionnaire, RQ1-2024)

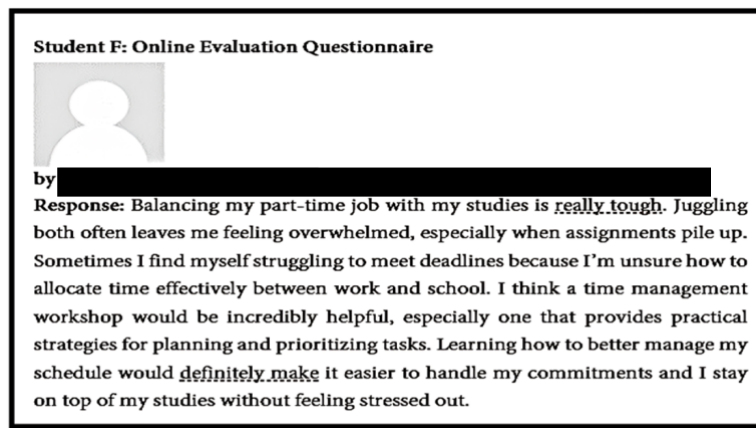


Figure 6. Student F's response (Source: Student F: Online Evaluation Questionnaire, RQ1-2024)

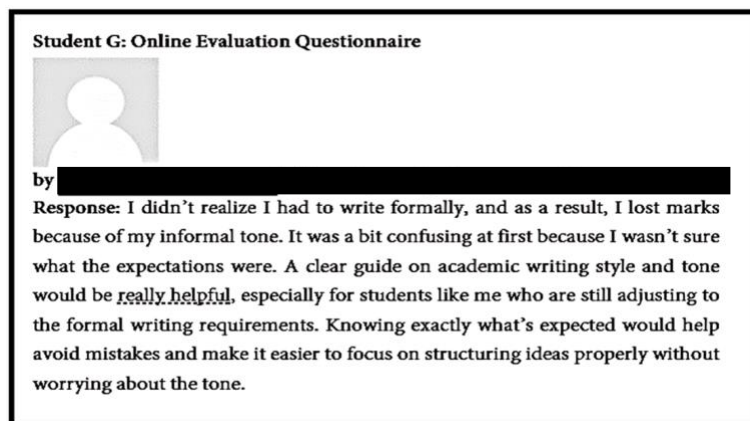


Figure 7. Student G's response (Source: Student G: Online Evaluation Questionnaire, RQ1-2024)

Student F expressed that time management is a significant challenge, as balancing work and studies feels overwhelming. A time management workshop would be incredibly helpful (**Figure 6**).

Student G highlighted that using an informal tone in academic essays led to the loss of valuable marks. A clear guide on academic writing style and tone, along with transparency about the objectives and outcomes of tasks, would be highly beneficial (**Figure 7**).

Student H divulged that the lack of prescribed textbooks is a significant challenge. Although notes were provided, they did not adequately explain complex concepts. Podcasts and vodcasts as supplemental tools would be beneficial, as they could save time by reducing the need to repeatedly refer to written materials (**Figure 8**).

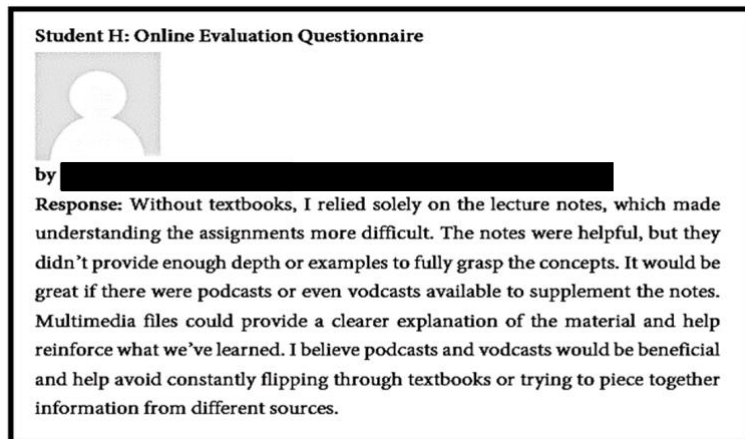


Figure 8. Student H's response (Source: Student H: Online Evaluation Questionnaire, RQ1-2024)

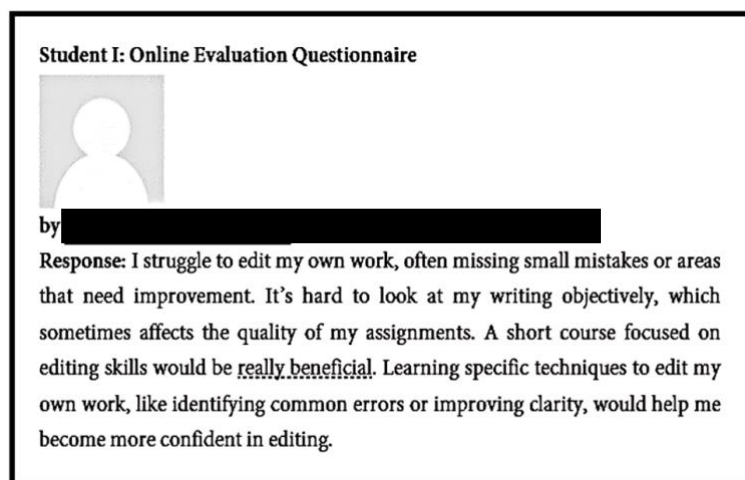


Figure 9. Student I's response (Source: Student I: Online Evaluation Questionnaire, RQ1-2024)

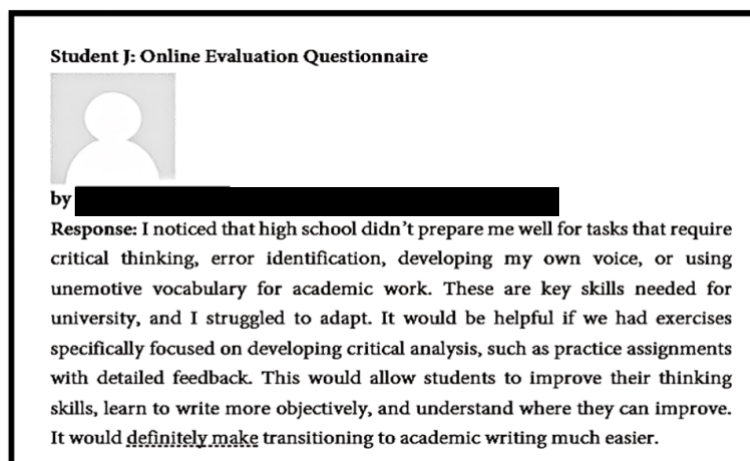


Figure 10. Student J's response (Source: Student J: Online Evaluation Questionnaire, RQ1-2024)

Student I revealed that error recognition and editing are significant challenges. A short course on editing skills would be beneficial, as learning specific editing techniques could yield positive results (**Figure 9**).

Student J identified critical thinking, error identification, developing an own voice, and using unemotive vocabulary in academic writing as major challenges. Practice assignments focused on developing critical analysis, accompanied by detailed feedback, would be highly beneficial (**Figure 10**).

Table 2. Key academic writing topics

Podcasts	Vodcasts
<u>First lesson</u>	<u>First lesson</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purpose of academic writing • The organization of academic writing • Establish your position • Writing in your voice • Using academic language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purpose of academic writing • The organization of academic writing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish your position • Writing in your voice • Using academic language
<u>Second lesson</u>	<u>Second lesson</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paragraph (concise and precise) • Topic sentences, supporting sentences, and concluding sentences • Citations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paragraph (concise and precise) • Topic sentences, supporting sentences, and concluding sentences • Citations
<u>Third lesson</u>	<u>Third lesson</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arguments developed by evidence and argument structure • Paraphrasing, summarizing, and quoting • Signposting • Plagiarism • Example of good writing and bad writing (comparison) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arguments developed by evidence and argument structure • Paraphrasing, summarizing, and quoting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signposting • Plagiarism • Example of good writing and bad writing (comparison)
<u>Fourth lesson</u>	<u>Fourth lesson</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Editing and proofreading 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Editing and proofreading

Based on the findings and analysis of the 10 AWM101 scripts, students exhibited a complex range of academic writing challenges, including difficulties with planning, time management, citation and referencing, academic tone, editing, error recognition, critical and analytical thinking, language barriers, informal vocabulary, limited access to prescribed textbooks, and poor internet infrastructure. These challenges align with findings from Crossley and Kim (2022), Patty (2024), Sarwat et al. (2021), and Yan (2024), and reflect foundational gaps from prior schooling, as noted by Dolasinski and Reynolds (2023), Eynon and Gambino (2023), Alostath (2021), and Hassan et al. (2021). Furthermore, students indicated that their high school education did not adequately prepare them for the demands of academic writing at the tertiary level, a finding consistent with the studies cited above. These studies indicate that foundational gaps in academic writing skills may persist in HE; however, attributing students' difficulties solely to their high school preparation overlooks the current challenges they encounter in the tertiary context. Recognizing persistent and recurring challenges in students' academic writing within the AWM101 module, the researcher adopted a student-centered and theory-informed pedagogical approach grounded in TDT. From a TDT perspective, these challenges were understood as manifestations of increased transactional distance arising from limited dialogue, insufficient instructional structure, and varying levels of learner autonomy. Students consequently expressed a need for explicit, scaffolded, and sustained academic support to address these gaps. Students identified several forms of academic support as important for strengthening their academic writing competencies. These included structured essay blueprints, comprehensive resources on citation practices, step-by-step guidance on referencing conventions, scaffolded and practical writing activities, targeted language support initiatives, time management workshops, guidance on maintaining an appropriate academic tone, a short course on editing techniques, and interventions aimed at developing critical and analytical thinking skills. In response to these identified needs, the researcher integrated podcasts and vodcasts as supplemental academic support tools to enhance dialogue and instructional structure within the module. These multimedia resources were designed to provide clear explanations, reinforcement of key concepts, and flexible access to academic support, with the aim of reducing transactional distance and supporting ongoing improvement in students' academic writing skills. **Table 2** presents a comprehensive overview of the key academic writing topics addressed through these interventions.

The use of podcasts and vodcasts was introduced to address the key academic writing concepts that students need to develop. Podcasts and vodcasts were integrated into the learning process as students are familiar and widely use digital platforms like TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat, as noted by Carson (2024), Mohale (2025), McWhirter (2024), Sullivan (2019), Wang and Ibrahim (2024), and Williams (2024). Podcasts and vodcasts provide both audio and visual content, allowing students to engage with the material in ways that align with their individual learning preferences. These tools support a range of learning

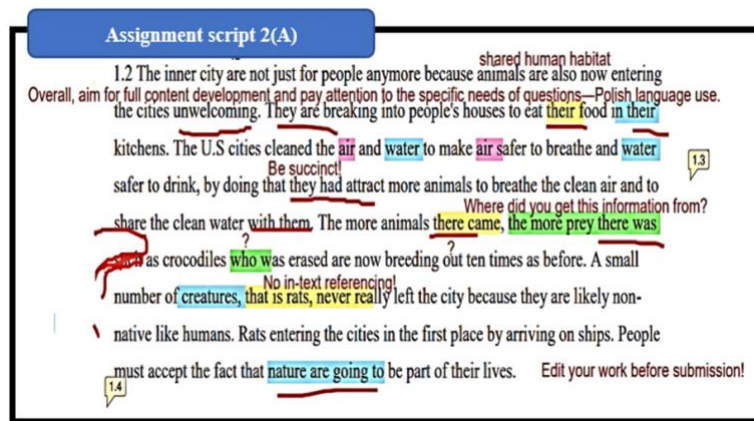


Figure 11. Assignment script 2(A) (Source: Assignment Script 2(A): Document Analysis, RQ2-2024)

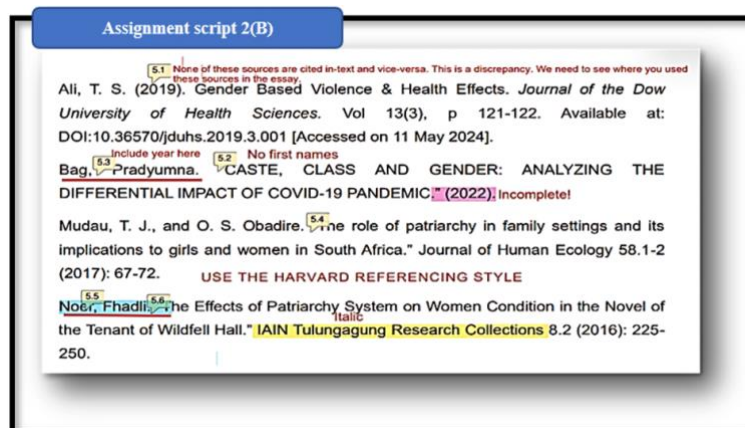


Figure 12. Assignment script 2(B) (Source: Assignment Script 2(B): Document Analysis, RQ2-2024)

styles and present an opportunity to simplify complex topics through an accessible and flexible format. They also contribute to improving the interaction between lecturers and students in the AWM101 module, addressing challenges related to communication and engagement (Moore, 2024). Studies by Dewi (2024) and Emma (2024) point out that the use of supplementary digital tools can create meaningful engagement with students by making learning content more interactive and accessible.

Ongoing Improvement in Academic Writing Skills

Document analysis provides a way to track changes and developments over time. In this study, it enabled the researcher to examine the second assignment scripts and take-home examination scripts to identify improvements in academic writing. The first five samples were extracted from the second assignment scripts, while the last five were taken from the take-home examination scripts. Document analysis was considered suitable for this study as it aligns with the research objectives.

Assignment script 2(A) script highlights several recurring challenges, including a lack of editing, incorrect referencing styles, inconsistent use of tenses (mixing present, past, and future), verbosity, and difficulty in addressing the requirements of the questions. Furthermore, the student struggle to unpack the meaning embedded within the questions, which remains a significant challenge (Figure 11).

Assignment script 2(B) indicates an improvement in source referencing. However, there is a lack of full adherence to the Harvard referencing style, and some references are incomplete. Additionally, a source was mistakenly listed in the references but was never cited in the body of the essay (Figure 12).

Assignment script 2(C) reveals significant editing issues, along with challenges in citation and case usage. Furthermore, the paragraph renders illogical due to spelling errors and a lack of supporting evidence to substantiate the arguments effectively (Figure 13).

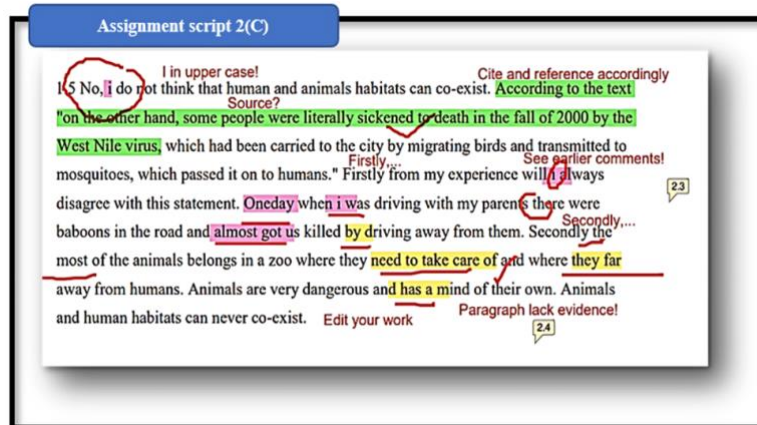


Figure 13. Assignment script 2(C) (Source: Assignment Script 2(C): Document Analysis, RQ2-2024)

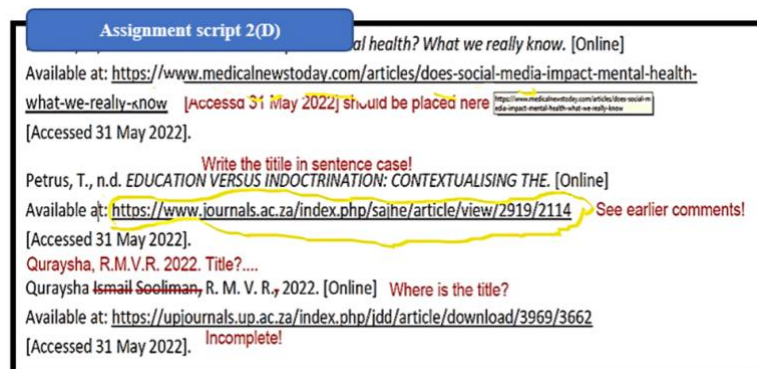


Figure 14. Assignment script 2(D) (Source: Assignment Script 2(D): Document Analysis, RQ2-2024)

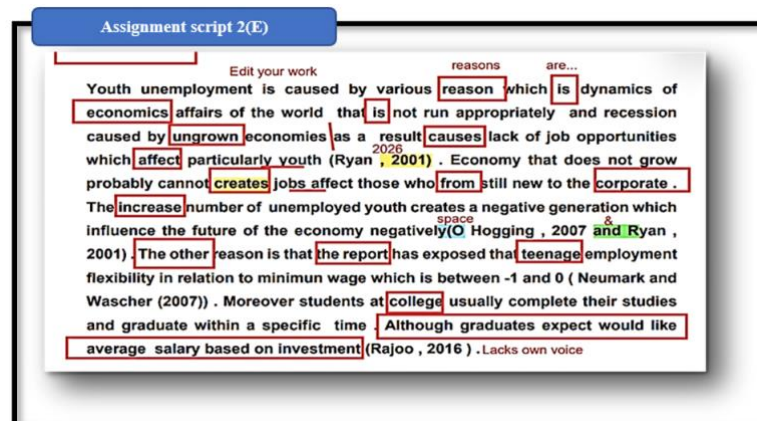


Figure 15. Assignment script 2(E) (Source: Assignment Script 2(E): Document Analysis, RQ2-2024)

Assignment 2(D) demonstrates a commendable effort in referencing; however, the Harvard referencing style was not fully adhered to. Inconsistent page justification caused the references to appear as though they were part of the next entry. Additionally, some references were incomplete, lacking titles (Figure 14).

Assignment 2(E) reveals significant editing challenges, as highlighted by the square boxes, including issues with grammar, plurality, and thematic disorder, such as inconsistent topic development. The ideas introduced in some sections lack logical progression, making it difficult for readers to follow the main argument. Additionally, although spelling errors are present, a more critical issue is the absence of the writer's own voice. There is an overreliance on external sources, which diminishes the writer's individuality and personal perspective (Figure 15).

The following samples were extracted from the take-home examination scripts of the AWM101 module.

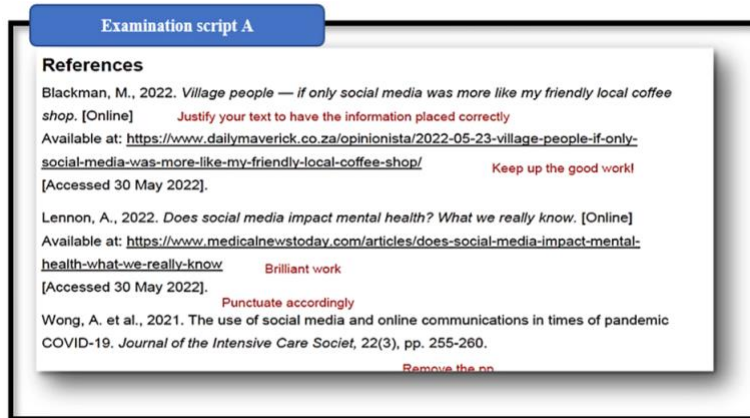


Figure 16. Examination script A (Source: Examination script A: Document Analysis, RQ2-2024)

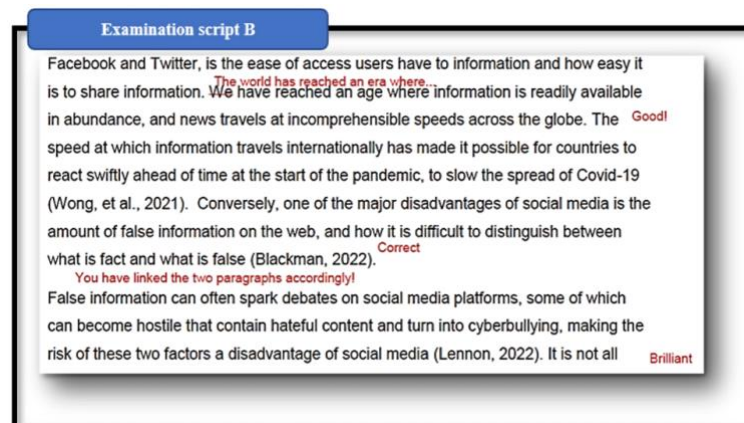


Figure 17. Examination script B (Source: Examination script B: Document Analysis, RQ2-2024)

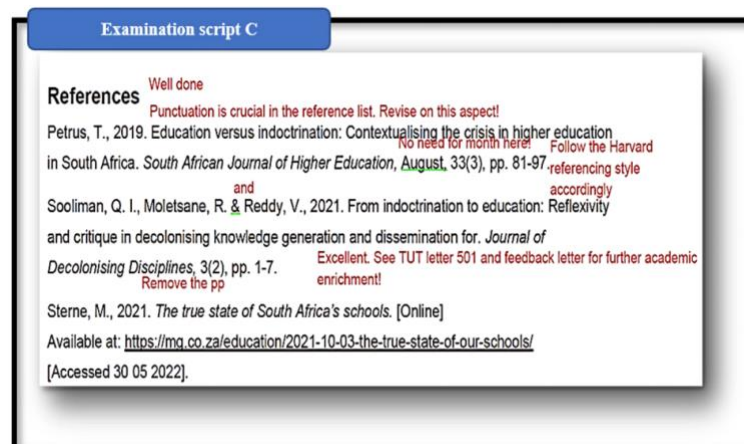


Figure 18. Examination script C (Source: Examination script C: Document Analysis, RQ2-2024)

Examination script A demonstrates an improved referencing technique, with references arranged in alphabetical order. However, ‘et al.’ is used in the body of the essay to reduce word count and shorten long author surnames, the full list of authors should still be provided in the reference list. Additionally, justifying the references would ensure proper alignment and consistency in the formatting (Figure 16).

Examination script B demonstrates improved academic writing skills. The arguments are logical, and two paragraphs are effectively linked. The citations are recent and appropriately used. A minor error is evident in the use of emotive language, such as ‘we,’ instead of maintaining an objective or neutral tone (Figure 17).

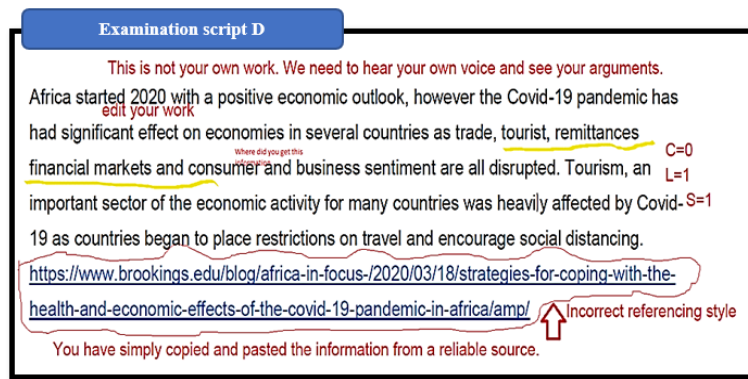


Figure 19. Examination script D (Source: Examination script D: Document Analysis, RQ2-2024)

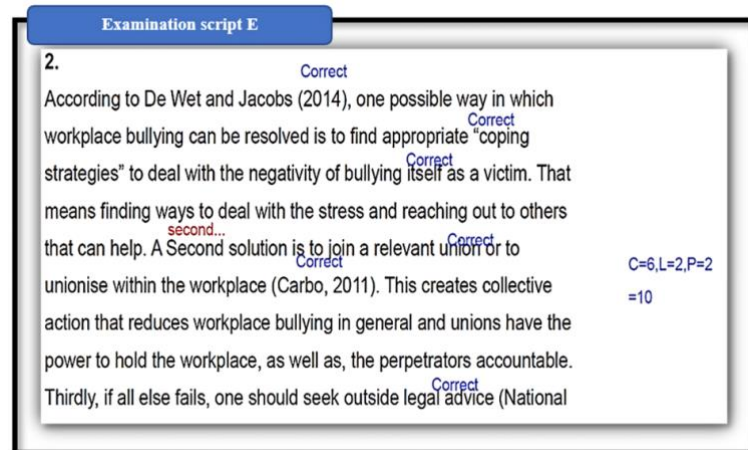


Figure 20. Examination script E (Source: Examination script E: Document Analysis, RQ2-2024)

Examination script C reveals that the references were arranged in alphabetical order. While the Harvard referencing style was not fully adhered to, there is a significant improvement compared to the assignment script samples. However, certain information, such as the mention of the month 'August,' was included unnecessarily and should have been omitted (Figure 18).

Examination script D highlights significant challenges, including instances of plagiarism, improper citation where a link is provided in the text, and a lack of engagement, as the content appears to have been copied verbatim (Figure 19).

Examination script E shows significant improvement in the use of citations, although some sources are outdated. A bit more editing could enhance the readability of the text. The student effectively employed a logical flow of ideas, using terms like 'firstly,' 'secondly,' and 'thirdly' to provide context and structure. However, the student's voice remains minimal, primarily due to a lack of active engagement with the material. This results in an overreliance on external sources, limiting the development of own perspective (Figure 20).

The findings indicate a mixed trajectory of ongoing improvement alongside recurring challenges in the academic writing skills of students enrolled in the AWM101 module. Notable improvements were observed in the second assignment and take-home examination scripts, where students increasingly demonstrated the ability to construct logical arguments, revise and edit their work, and maintain coherence across paragraphs. These scripts reflected a clearer logical flow of ideas, more effective use of discourse markers, and improved articulation and academic expression. In addition, students showed greater compliance with academic conventions, including the accurate application of in-text citation, adherence to the Harvard referencing style, and correct alphabetical arrangement of reference lists. Structural aspects of academic writing also improved, with more clearly defined topic sentences, well-developed supporting details, and coherent concluding remarks. It is essential that academic support aligns with the needs of today's virtual student cohort (Lee, 2020; Strielkowski, 2020). These findings are consistent with studies by Gamlath (2022), Hooda et al. (2022), Mohale (2023), and Moussa and Ali (2022). Despite improvements, recurring challenges persist in some

second assignment scripts and take-home examination scripts, including inadequate editing, difficulty identifying errors, incorrect citation and referencing, overreliance on external sources, spelling errors, weak authorial voice, inconsistent tense usage, grammar and plurality issues, and thematic disorder. Students also face difficulties with topic development, verbosity, meeting question requirements, and unpacking embedded meanings. The use of English as the language of instruction further exacerbates these challenges for some students, consistent with observations by Bolton et al. (2023), Hassan et al. (2021), and Kelly and Hou (2022), who note that English as Mol intensifies learning difficulties for EAL students in ODeL contexts. The implementation of podcasts and vodcasts has contributed to improvements in academic writing skills. This finding is supported by Mohale (2025), Gerber (2022), Surovic (2023), and Rajar (2020), who argue that the multimedia tools serve as effective supplemental learning resources in ODeL context. Podcasts and vodcasts have helped bridge the transaction distance gap, as they are easily accessible, downloadable, and concise, with an average duration of 15 minutes (Moore, 2024; Rime et al., 2022). However, some students continue to struggle due to various factors. Some have not visited the AWM101 site, despite an online tour conducted via Microsoft Teams. Others have not attended virtual classes, downloaded the podcasts and vodcasts, or have resorted to hiring ghost writers in an attempt to pass the module without critical engagement. Employment commitments and other responsibilities may also contribute to these challenges. The lack of engagement affects their academic growth and may harm the institutional reputation. Some students exhibit instances of accidental or intentional plagiarism, which may be attributed, in part, to limited engagement with module content and insufficient familiarity with academic writing conventions. To address this, explicit and formative feedback was provided across all assignment scripts and take-home examination scripts, with particular attention given to identifying areas requiring improvement. As noted by Maphoto (2022), marker feedback constitutes a critical pedagogical mechanism for addressing both major and minor academic writing challenges. However, despite the provision of preparatory and supplemental academic support, recurring writing challenges persist for some students, as reflected in their assessment performance. This highlights the need for sustained and systematic academic writing support, specifically in contexts involving ESL students. Ongoing practice, coupled with consistent and targeted academic support, has the potential to strengthen students' academic writing competencies, support the attainment of academic outcomes, and contribute to improved student retention.

The findings guided by transactional distance theory (Moore, 1973) highlight how the integration of podcasts and vodcasts actively supported students' learning experiences, addressing both **RQ1** and **RQ2**. The interventions enhanced dialogue, provided structured guidance, and promoted learner autonomy, which supported the reduction of transactional distance within the ODeL environment. Students engaged with content asynchronously and repeatedly, allowing them to work at their own pace, revisit explanations as needed, and extend academic dialogue beyond scheduled virtual classes, mitigating feelings of isolation. From a TDT perspective, the podcasts and vodcasts scaffolded complex writing tasks and encouraged learners to take ownership of their learning, demonstrating how structured support and flexible engagement can jointly contribute to bridging transactional distance.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how student support initiatives influenced the academic writing skills of first-year students using online evaluation questionnaires, document analysis, podcasts, and vodcasts. Student support plays a critical role in enhancing the academic writing competencies of EAL students in ODeL contexts, which remain underrepresented in the literature compared to contact institutions. Many South African students face academic writing challenges due to inadequate preparation during their high school education. The implementation of online evaluation questionnaires provided insights into students' academic challenges and gaps, serving as a scaffolding tool to identify specific areas of difficulty in writing. Based on the findings, the researcher recorded podcasts and vodcasts addressing the identified challenges. The study revealed notable improvements in academic writing skills, including better adherence to the Harvard referencing style, improved argumentation, sentence construction, paragraph coherence, spelling accuracy, paragraphing, and paraphrasing. However, some academic writing challenges persisted in both the second assignment scripts and take-home examination scripts, such as citation and referencing difficulties, lack of personal voice, weak

argumentation, improper use of discourse markers, and time management issues. To address these challenges, the continued use of supplemental tools such as podcasts and vodcasts is essential. Some students resorted to plagiarism due to inadequate citation and referencing skills and reliance on ghost writers. Despite the regular availability of virtual classes and the accessibility of podcasts and vodcasts on the Moodle AWM101 LMS site, some students did not utilize these resources effectively. This study contributes to the body of knowledge on academic writing support by providing insights specific to the ODeL context, highlighting interventions that effectively bridge transactional distance and enhance student engagement and learning outcomes. Limitations include the small, purposive sample and the focus on a single module, which may limit generalizability. Nevertheless, the findings offer valuable guidance for ODeL institutions seeking to implement evidence-based academic support strategies. Future research could explore the reasons for recurring academic challenges despite support interventions and identify scalable and contextually appropriate solutions.

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AI statement: Artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used during the preparation of this manuscript to support the refinement of the language and overall quality of expression. Specifically, AI was employed to improve vocabulary selection in order to ensure appropriate academic tone and contextually accurate word usage, as well as to identify and correct language inconsistencies, grammatical errors, and punctuation inaccuracies. These enhancements were made to maintain a consistent academic tone throughout the manuscript. All substantive intellectual content, analysis, and interpretation remain solely the responsibility of the author.

Declaration of interest: The author declared no competing interests.

Data availability: Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation in the study, and this was clearly communicated before data collection commenced. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage without any negative consequences. All confidential personal information, specifically participants' identifying details, was treated with strict confidentiality and securely stored to ensure privacy and anonymity. The collected data will be used strictly for academic and research purposes and will be destroyed upon publication of the article in line with ethical research practices and institutional guidelines. No participant was asked sensitive, degrading, or dehumanising questions that could place them in a vulnerable position or compromise their dignity, rights, or well-being. The study adhered to established ethical principles to ensure the safety, respect, and protection of all participants throughout the research process.

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