

Face-To-Face Versus Online Learning: First-Year Students' Experiences of Academic Writing

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ABSTRACT

Encountering challenges in academic writing is inevitable for first-year students who are yet to become familiar with the writing patterns and structure. Students often struggle with the change; online learning and its advantages have not fully materialised due to the disruptions, familiarity, resistance, and problems associated with technology. The purpose of the study was to examine first-year students' experience with the face-to-face learning model and blended learning model at TVET College in Western Cape South Africa. The study employed a mixed-method approach to collect data from the research participants. The online questionnaire was adopted as the instrument of data collection for the quantitative data and 185 participants completed the questionnaire. An interview schedule guide was the instrument of data collection for the qualitative data and twelve (12) students voluntarily participated in the semi-structured interviews. Findings from both the quantitative data and qualitative data revealed that mere technology is not as effective since integrating it into teaching approaches and providing students with interactive activities and collaboration can enhance their academic performance. Face-to-face contact remains a vital part of teaching and learning, and this conclusion emphasises that blended learning is a novel and valuable way to reach students, underscoring the combination of both face-to-face and online learning. This article makes an important contribution to higher education (HE) and learning models by examining the first-year students' experience of learning models at a South African Technical and Vocational Education and Technology (TVET) college in the Western Cape.

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Publication History

Received: 14th February, 2024

Accepted: 12th April, 2024

Published online:

21st May, 2024

Keywords: *Blended Learning Applications, Distance Education, English Second Language, Face-to-face, First-year Students, Writing, Online learning.*

INTRODUCTION

Technological advancements offer a huge opportunity for teaching and learning in this digital age. It brings about a shift in the educational pedagogy of teaching and learning. Before now, the traditional way through which teaching and learning were done was by using the face-to-face learning model.¹ This is seen as the prevalent and dominant method of teaching. Other learning models such as blending learning, online learning and distance learning surfaced because of technological advancements.²

¹ Tyler S. Love, Doris Lee, and Mary Napoli, "Integrating Science Concepts Through Poetry: A Study Comparing Online and Face-to-Face Teaching Methods Courses for Pre-Service Elementary Educators," *Journal of Science Education and Technology* 33, no. 1 (February 6, 2024): 57–67, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10956-023-10073-w>.

² Julia Sevy-Biloon, "Virtual or Face to Face Classes: Ecuadorian University Students' Perceptions during the Pandemic.," *English Language Teaching Educational Journal* 4, no. 1 (2021): 15–24.

The emergence of COVID-19 disrupted all global activities, including the activities of tertiary institutions of higher learning. As a result of this, other models of teaching such as the blended learning model were deployed.³ Blended learning technology was in existence before the pandemic, but the pandemic was a major reason why blended learning became popular and served to sustain teaching and learning in institutions of higher learning.⁴ The face-to-face learning model appears to be the only pedagogical approach teachers employ to teach students both in primary and secondary schools. This mode of teaching is critical for establishing and developing students' intellectual abilities.⁵ In this approach, the teacher dominates the student's learning, and it is not dependent on technology. Both the teacher and the student do not need to be digitally literate for teaching and learning to occur. The pace of learning is determined by the lecturer. It encourages social interaction where the teacher provides direct communication and feedback whenever questions are raised. One of the drawbacks of this approach is the assumption that all learners are uniform in the way they learn, irrespective of the category and the level of study of the students.⁶ Using this model, students may be passive learners rather than active learners.⁷

On the contrary, the blended learning model supports active learning. It is a dynamic model that combines both online and offline learning. It offers flexibility to the learners. Learning can take place anytime and at any place at one's own speed.⁸ Some of the drawbacks of this approach may include technological connection issues, students bearing the cost of data, no immediate feedback, and a lack of human interactions.⁹

Previous studies have extensively focused on students who are either in their final year of study or in their penultimate year of study or even postgraduate students regarding their learning experiences between the face-to-face learning model¹⁰ and other kinds of learning models such as the blended learning model.¹¹ There is little empirical evidence that focuses on first-year students' preference for learning approaches.¹² Little is known about the extent to which the traditional face-to-face learning model may impact the academic performance of students in their first year compared to other learning models.

Recent studies pointed out that the models applied in teaching and learning determine the performance of the students. Yet there is a lack of empirical evidence suggesting that the effectiveness of the face-to-face model of learning differs from the blended learning model for freshmen in terms of their academic performance which is still to be ascertained. This study intends to fill this knowledge gap. This study provides an understanding to guide the university management and policymakers on the learning model or the combination of models that apply to freshmen teaching and learning. These interventions will enhance and improve the learning activities of first-year students to improve their academic writing and performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous studies have generated mixed and inconclusive findings regarding face-to-face learning models and blended learning. Some studies indicated that students who were taught through online learning platforms outperformed their peers who were taught with the face-to-face learning model given the same

³ I.A. Adeoye, A F Adanikin, and Ariyo Adanikin, "COVID-19 and E-Learning: Nigeria Tertiary Education System Experience," *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Applied Science* 5, no. 5 (2020): 28–31.

⁴ M. Adnan and K. Anwar, "Online Learning amid the COVID-19 Pandemic: Students' Perspectives," *Journal of Pedagogical Sociology and Psychology* 2, no. 1 (2022): 45–51.

⁵ Frederick Roger Hyatt, "Spiritual and Character Development in Online Education at Brigham Young University" (Brigham Young University, 2020), <http://hdl.lib.byu.edu/1877/etd11513>.

⁶ Bradford S Bell and Jessica E Federman, "E-Learning in Postsecondary Education," *The Future of Children*, 2013, 165–85.

⁷ Denise Finch and Karen Jacobs, "Online Education: Best Practices to Promote Learning," *Proceedings of the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society Annual Meeting* 56, no. 1 (September 1, 2012): 546–50, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1071181312561114>.

⁸ Ioannis Kamarianos et al., "Towards an Understanding of University Students' Response in Times of Pandemic Crisis (Covid-19)," *European Journal of Education Studies* 7, no. 7 (June 27, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.46827/ejes.v7i7.3149>.

⁹ Novrika Nartiningrum and Arif Nugroho, "Online Learning amidst Global Pandemic: EFL Students' Challenges, Suggestions, and Needed Materials," *ENGLISH FRANCA: Academic Journal of English Language and Education* 4, no. 2 (November 13, 2020): 115, <https://doi.org/10.29240/ef.v4i2.1494>.

¹⁰ Dilrukshi Gamage, Jose A. Ruy Pérez-Valiente, and Justin Reich, "Editorial: A Paradigm Shift in Designing Education Technology for Online Learning: Opportunities and Challenges," *Frontiers in Education* 8 (May 3, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2023.1194979>.

¹¹ R. M. S. Molokwane and Luther-King Junior Zogli, "Perceptions of First-Year Students from Disadvantaged Backgrounds of E-Learning at the Durban University of Technology, South Africa," *Progressio*, August 5, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.25159/2663-5895/10210>.

¹² Sepulveda-Escobar, P., & Morrison, A. 'Online teaching placement during the COVID-19 pandemic in Chile: Challenges and opportunities', *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 43(4) (2020): 587-607. doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2020.1820981.

conditions.¹³ Other studies showed that no differences were observed in the learning outcomes and performance when comparing the face-to-face learning approach to blended learning. In addition, some other studies showed that some students have more difficulties in online learning than in the traditional face-to-face learning approach.¹⁴ This may be because of student characteristics and the role of the instructor.

Prior studies on learning models showed that both traditional learning models and blended learning cannot be isolated from one another. Rather, blended learning can be used as a supplement for learning and cannot replace traditional face-to-face learning. For instance, a study conducted among Chinese graduate students using a qualitative approach revealed that the experiences and attributes of the students in China towards online learning are preferable to the face-to-face learning model. Asden and Helm examined the impact of the use of technology in teaching and learning in the United Kingdom. They found that the use of technology can be an effective mechanism for interaction between students and their peers and between teachers and students aiding teaching and learning. They concluded that utilising blended learning allows for better engagement between students and their lecturers, and that blended learning serves as a supplement to face-to-face learning.¹⁵ Previous studies compared face-to-face and blended learning models in the United States.¹⁶ Despite the fact their studies pointed out some of the numerous advantages the blended learning model holds over the traditional face-to-face learning model, students still prefer traditional classroom learning because of better human interaction compared to the feeling of being isolated when utilising blended learning. Other studies reported that students see online learning as a platform where assignments can be submitted and not mainly for teaching and learning.¹⁷

The evidence provided from the findings enumerated in previous studies regarding the effectiveness of comparing the face-to-face model to other models of learning such as blended learning differs from study to study. The disparities in the findings of these studies highlighted here were based on the demographic characteristics of students, location of study, course of study, the methodology applied, and the population of the study. The variables responsible for the variations and disparities recorded by previous studies have been enumerated. As such, the findings of these studies may not apply to the context of study, first-year students in TVET college.

The learning culture environment differs from country to country. This further explains the reasons why first-year students' ability to adapt to a learning model impacts the learning outcome and academic performance. These points may be elucidated further indicating that some students will do excellently well with one learning approach but will perform poorly with another learning approach. In other words, the ability of students to adapt from one learning culture to another greatly impacts their learning. Also, the different cultural backgrounds of students play a role in their learning experience irrespective of the learning model or approach used in teaching and learning. Students' choices and preferences for learning models differ in the course and subject of study. For instance, the study of Kvavik showed that engineering students and business management students had the highest preference for technology in the classroom compared to the humanities and social sciences. Kvavik further revealed that classroom technology allowed for better illustrations of complex models and theories and more opportunities for reinforcement.¹⁸ As earlier mentioned, the effectiveness of learning models does not rely on the students alone but also on the way teachers teach. It is a priority for this study to examine the learning experience of first-year students in relation to the models of learning they prefer for teaching and learning in TVET College in South Africa.

¹³ Anna Ya Ni, "Comparing the Effectiveness of Classroom and Online Learning: Teaching Research Methods," *Journal of Public Affairs Education* 19, no. 2 (June 18, 2013): 199–215, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15236803.2013.12001730>.

¹⁴ Di Xu and Shanna S Jaggars, "Performance Gaps between Online and Face-to-Face Courses: Differences across Types of Students and Academic Subject Areas," *The Journal of Higher Education* 85, no. 5 (2014): 633–59.

¹⁵ Liz Aspden and Paul Helm, "Making the Connection in a Blended Learning Environment," *Educational Media International* 41, no. 3 (2004): 245–52.

¹⁶ Allan Yuen et al., "Course Management Systems in Higher Education: Understanding Student Experiences," *Interactive Technology and Smart Education* 6, no. 3 (August 20, 2009): 189–205, <https://doi.org/10.1108/17415650911005393>.

¹⁷ Yuen et al., "Course Management Systems in Higher Education: Understanding Student Experiences."

¹⁸ R. B. Kvavik, "Convenience, Communications, and Control: How Students Use Technology," in *Educating the Net Generation*, ed. D. G. Oblinger and J. L. Oblinger (Educause, 2005), 7.1-7.2.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is premised on the constructivism framework advocated by Vygotsky.¹⁹ The constructivist theory of learning is based on the learner's own experiences in the construction and the understanding of the world. The learners' experiences may be based on past experiences with a subject matter or a phenomenon.²⁰ This implies that different individuals may have different experiences regarding learning models. This includes the traditional face-to-face learning model and other learning models such as blended learning. This may impact their learning. According to constructivists, emphasis is placed on knowledge creation rather than knowledge transmission. This creates an avenue for students to gain and acquire the skills required to navigate their academic learning. For instance, knowledge construction takes place in situations and environments where individuals engage in learning activities.²¹ This is possible by active engagement and understanding of the learning environment, which, is in relation to their experiences, perceptions, the mode, and choice of learning. With constructivist learning, students construct their knowledge and interpret their reality based on their learning experiences. This implies that learners need to build their skills to navigate the ever-changing learning environment.

METHODOLOGY

The study applied a mixed-method approach to understanding first-year students' perception of blended learning technology at TVET College in South Africa. Both the quantitative and qualitative approaches were applied in this study. The mixed method approach was imperative in this study because it validates and complements the results obtained from one approach to another.²² The first-year students of TVET College were the target population in this study.²³ These participants were chosen because their online readiness towards academic writing and learning in higher learning was considered imperative considering the transition from high school to the university environment. The ethics research committee approved this study to be conducted. Ethical clearance was granted by the Tshwane University of Technology's Research Ethics Committee on the 29th of April 2021.

A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit first-year students of TVET College in the Western Cape, South Africa. Email addresses of all first-year students were provided by the Human Resource Management of the institution. Invitations to participate in the study were sent to 600 freshmen by email. The online survey accompanied a consent letter detailing the objective of the study. Only students who gave their consent to participate in the study by signing the consent letter completed the online survey. In all, 185 students completed the survey. Also, 12 participants took part in the semi-structured interviews. Since there is no sampling frame or size regarding the number of participants that are required for participation, the literature suggests that until saturation is reached when exploring a phenomenon more participants can still be added to the list of participants.²⁴

Two instruments were designed to collect data for this study. These instruments include a structured online questionnaire, and an interview schedule guide were developed to collect the data. The questionnaire items were adapted based on the literature review on the theoretical underpinnings of blended learning of students in relation to their academic learning and performance. The interview schedule guide was designed to collect data from first-year students about their perceptions and learning preferences regarding the use of blended learning technologies concerning academic writing and performance. The interview guide was validated by two experts in the field of academic writing and one expert in assessment and evaluation.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were employed to analyse the data collected from the online questionnaire. Tables and pie charts were used for descriptive analysis. Here descriptive statistics were applied to give a

¹⁹ Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*.

²⁰ Bourelle et al., "Sites of Multimodal Literacy: Comparing Student Learning in Online and Face-to-Face Environments."

²¹ Zhang et al., "Can E-Learning Replace Classroom Learning?"

²² Creswell, J.W. and Creswell, J.D. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, Sage, Los Angeles, 2018.

²³ K. Maree and J. Pietersen, "Sampling," in *First Steps in Research*, ed. K. Maree (Pretoria: Van Schaik Publishers, 2020), 213-224.

²⁴ Shari L. Dworkin, "Sample Size Policy for Qualitative Studies Using In-Depth Interviews," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 41, no. 6 (December 12, 2012): 1319–20, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-012-0016-6>.

summary of frequency-based scores and to present values. This analysis was performed using SPSS version 25. Thematic analysis was applied to analyse the responses obtained from the semi-structured interview in the study.²⁵

RESULTS

Quantitative Findings

Demographic information of the research participants for quantitative study n=185

The demographic information of the participants who took part in the quantitative aspect of the study is presented in Figures 1 to 3. While for the qualitative aspect of the study only 12 participants participated in the study and their demographic information is also presented in Table 1 below.

Gender

The gender of the respondents is presented in Figure 1. The majority were females (86%), and only 14.29% were male.

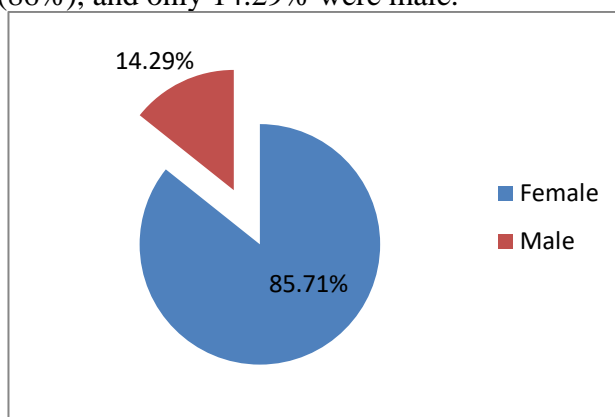


Figure 1: Gender of the respondents

Age

The respondents' age is presented in Figure 2. According to Figure 2, 23.57% of the respondents were between 18-19 years. Notably, 50% of the respondents were in the age range of 20-24 years, and 17.86% were in the age range of 25-30 years. In addition, 5% were in the age range between 31-34 years. However, only 3.57% were in the age range of 35 or more.

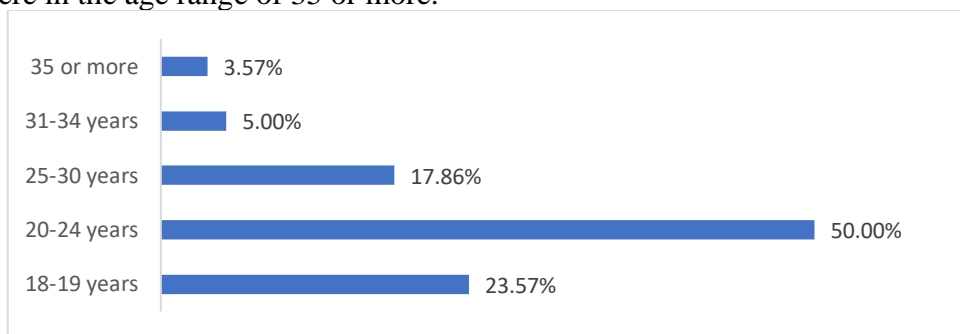


Figure 2: Age of the respondents

The final grades in English for Grade 12 students

Figure 3 captures the final score for Grade 12 English First additional language. Sixty percent (60%) was the highest score obtained by most of the respondents for Grade 12 English First additional language. Following this grading, 32% as shown in Figure 3 scored between 10%-59%. In addition, 7% of the respondents scored between 30%-39% for Grade 12 English First additional language. Only 1% of the learners scored between 0%-29%. The mean score of their Matric exam in English was 60.1%.

²⁵ C. A. Mertler, *Introduction to Educational Research* (California: Sage Publication, 2016).

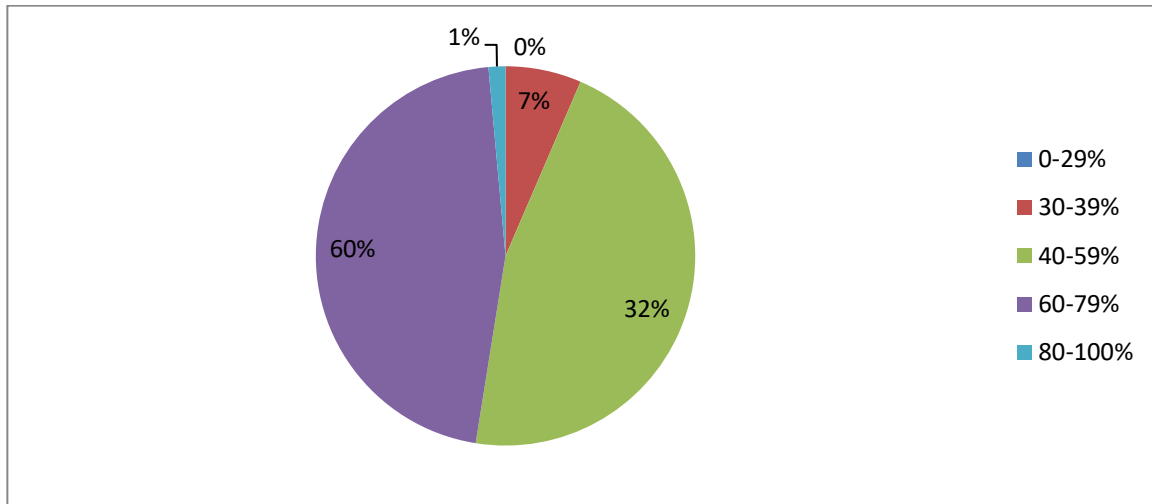


Figure 3: The final grades in English for Grade 12 students

Table 1: Socio-demographical data of the participants

Participant number	Participants code	Age in years	Race-ethnic group	High School Type	Grade 12 English ESL mark in %	Academic Year of Study level at TVET
1.	P1m	35	African	Township School	30%	1 st
2.	P5m	19	Coloured	Former model C school	82%	1 st
3.	P4m	20	Coloured	Township School	45%	1 st
4.	P2f	25	Indian	Township School	85%	1 st
5.	P3f	24	Coloured	Former model C school	84%	1 st
6.	P6f	21	African	Township School	52%	1 st
7.	P7f	26	Coloured	Township School	40%	1 st
8.	P8f	26	Coloured	Township School	86%	1 st
9.	P9f	19	African	Other institution type	55%	1 st
10.	P10f	30	African	Other institution type	60%	1 st
11.	P11f	25	African	Former model C school	75%	1 st
12.	P12f	24	Coloured	Township School	41%	1 st

The gender composition of the participants consisted of three males and 9 females. In terms of their race, six were coloured, five were African and only one of the participants was of Indian descent.

Face-to-face learning experience of first-year students

This section provides the experience of first-year students experience with the traditional learning model, which is face-to-face. In this learning approach, social and human interactions are between teachers and students and students and peers. Table 2 indicates the order in which the face-to-face learning model impacts students' learning outcomes and performance.

Table 2: Face-to-face learning when interacting with peers and lecturers

Likert item	Response (%)					Mean	Rank
	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied		
1.The quality of interaction with other students	12%	48%	19%	13%	8%	3.46	1
2.The quality of interaction with the instructor (lecturer)	19%	44%	19%	13%	5%	3.44	2
3.The amount of time interacting with the instructor (lecturer)	15%	44%	20%	13%	7%	3.43	3
4.The amount of time interacting with other students	11%	51%	16%	18%	5%	3.40	4

Item 1 in Table 2 concerned the respondents' viewpoints on the quality of their interactions with other students. Twelve percent (12%) of the respondents reported that they were very satisfied with their interactions with other students, 48% of the respondents reported they were satisfied, 19% of the respondents reported neither, 13% said they were dissatisfied and 8% reported that they were very dissatisfied. This finding is supported by previous studies, which found that social interaction is meant to ascertain whether the learner is on the same page with the instructor during the learning activity.²⁶ Much time must thus be spent on this activity, which is not always the case.

With regards to Item 2, ranked number two in terms of importance, regarding the quality of interaction with the instructor, 19% were very satisfied, 44% were satisfied, but 19% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, 13% were dissatisfied and 5% were very dissatisfied. Many satisfied students were welcomed since online learning and communication have become increasingly important as opposed to face-to-face contact²⁷. In the case of satisfaction with the amount of time spent with teachers, 44% in Item 3 indicated satisfactory communication with the online instructor. In item 4, 51% indicated that they were satisfied with the amount of time interacting with other students. Since understanding among the various

²⁶ Donnelly, R. 'Supporting Lecturers in the Disciplines in the Affective Academic Writing Process', *Journal of Academic Writing*, 3(2) (2014):61-69; Reino, N.S. Students' critical thinking in academic writing: Perspectives of Rukwangali language education lecturers at Rundu Campus. Rundu Campus: University of Namibia. (Dissertation MTech) (2020).

²⁷ Almaiah, M.A., Al-Khasawne, A.S. & Athunibat, A.. 'Exploring the critical challenges and factors influencing the E-learning system usage during COVID-19 pandemic', *Education and Information Technologies*, 25 (2020):5261-5280. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-020-10219-y>

groups is so vital, it emerged that the gap of not being attended to as well as the amount of time, must be addressed. This is a definite aspect that must be taken note of. It follows that online time must be extended.

Students' familiarity with the following most common blended learning models

The respondents provided their viewpoints on the form of blended learning technologies familiar to them at one point or the other. Their familiarity with blended learning applications, to a large extent, revealed how they have been able to integrate it into their academic writing

Table 3: Respondents' familiarity with blended learning models

Likert item	Response (%)					Mean	Item
	Very familiar	Familiar	Unsure	Unfamiliar	Very unfamiliar		
1.E-learning self-study	19%	44%	19%	12%	4%	3.61	1
2.Cooperative learning	14%	43%	23%	16%	4%	3.46	2
3.The learning management system (LMS)	9%	36%	33%	16%	5%	3.29	3
4.Instructor-led (face-to-face)	14%	30%	31%	16%	8%	3.24	4
5.On-the-job training – work-integrated learning	11%	31%	25%	23%	8%	3.14	5
6.Simulation	6%	25%	39%	21%	8%	2.98	6
7.Live e-learning	3%	23%	36%	30%	7%	2.83	7

Concerning Item 1 in Table 3, the first-year students voted for the model of blended learning models that they were familiar with. E-learning self-study emerged as the most common blended technology the students were familiar with at 44,4 %, with a mean score of 3.61, and it was self-paced in collaboration with their learning. The respondents provided their viewpoints on the form of blended learning technologies they are familiar with, in the case of e-learning self-study. Twelve percent (12%) were unfamiliar with it and 4% were very unfamiliar with it. The existing literature supports e-learning study because it allows learners to select what they wish to learn and decide when they will learn.

With Item 2, which tested the familiarity with cooperative learning, it was revealed that 14% were very familiar, 43% familiar, 23% were unsure, 16% were unfamiliar and 4% were very unfamiliar. It follows that many of the students were familiar with this learning strategy. Furthermore, the respondents provided their viewpoints on the form of blended learning technologies they are familiar with, in the case of the learning management systems as described in Item 3 of , it emerged that 9% of the respondents reported that they were very familiar with it, 36% said they were familiar with it, 33% reported that they were unsure about it, 16% of the respondents reported they were not familiar with cooperative learning and only 5% said that they were very unfamiliar with. It emerged that many were not so familiar with or sure of what it was. Instructor-led learning as part of Item 4, received the following votes: 14% were very unfamiliar with it, 30% were familiar, 31% were unsure, 16% were unfamiliar and 8% were very unfamiliar. A possible explanation could be that students were not familiar with the term *instructor-led* but would possibly have responded differently if the words teacher instruction were used.

Item 5 is quite important in the modern work-related orientation of students considering the lack of jobs in South Africa. Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) is central to supporting students to find jobs

after the completion of their studies.²⁸ Eleven per cent (11%) were very familiar, 31% were familiar, 25% were unsure, 23% were unfamiliar and 3% were very unfamiliar. It emerged that a large percentage if one considers the numbers for undecided and disagreed, were not fully aware that they would have to find jobs after their studies. For Item 6 which focused on simulation, the votes revealed that 6% were very familiar, 25% were familiar, 39% were unsure, 21% were unfamiliar and 8% were very unfamiliar with understanding simulation models. Concerning live e-learning in Item 7, it surfaced that 3% were very familiar, 23% were familiar, 36% were unsure, 30% unfamiliar and 7% were very unfamiliar with e-learning.

Qualitative Findings

For the qualitative approach, two key themes and sub-themes emanated from the semi-structured interview, and they are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Theme 1: Understanding blended learning (n=12)

Theme: Understanding blended and online learning	Sub-themes for theme: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Blended learning ● Face-to-face versus online learning ● Learning Management System (LMS) (online learning)
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Theme 1: Understanding blended and online learning

The participants' contributions indicated that blended learning entails using both face-to-face and online learning.

A participant had the following to say:

“For me, blended learning is about when we as students learn either face to face or using an online platform (P10f).”

And another said:

“Online learning is not like in class when the lecturer explains, whereas in face-to-face it is 110 per cent better. In face-to-face, we pause the lecturer and request explanations (P12f).”

Another participant explained that:

“I have never used Skype before, but I know we can use the LMS at the campus; you can also learn via WhatsApp. Everyone could participate in the LMS where we use the LMS. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, the LMS is better when we learn. One can also at the campus engage with the lecturer, and that is also a better option (P6f).”

Theme one sub-theme: Face-to-face-versus online learning

The findings here run contrary to the arguments that contemporary tertiary students have prevalently integrated new technologies into their lives, and that technology has become an important component of youth popular culture and is also important to instructors. One can anticipate that there is potential in exploiting technology to enhance students' language and literacy skills, which include academic writing and general academic success.²⁹ However, not everything usually proceeds smoothly with technology integration as part of blended learning.

A participant reacted as follows:

“Both face-to-face learning 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.”

²⁸ Denise Jackson, “Employability Skill Development in Work-Integrated Learning: Barriers and Best Practice,” *Studies in Higher Education* 40, no. 2 (February 7, 2015): 350–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2013.842221>.

²⁹ Jia Li, Catherine Snow, and Claire White, “Teen Culture, Technology and Literacy Instruction: Urban Adolescent Students’ Perspectives,” *Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology / La Revue Canadienne de l’apprentissage et de La Technologie* 41, no. 3 (October 31, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.21432/T2004H>.

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 also, we're not too engaged. Otherwise, it is just a presentation. It becomes so boring, and we don't get the maximum. When we have WhatsApp sessions, for example, when we log off, there is no return. 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 (P2f)."

Another participant opined that:

"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. With online learning, you need to adapt and learn from a screen. Usually, with face-to-face learning, there is a person there to teach you (P9f)."

Another participant noted that:

"I'm not really familiar with online learning, but I still need to become familiar with it. But with face-to-face learning, my work is always up to date, I don't need to catch up then. I can ask the lecturer questions and so on (P7f)."

Another participant voiced his preference and said:

"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 (P8f)."

Yet another said:

"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. It is like I do not know how to explain it, but face-to-face learning is much better than online learning. (P11m.)"

Only one participant saw some positivity in online learning:

"I think online learning is safe, especially if you care about the COVID situation. Face-to-face learning as I said, is when you see and engage, or talk with your lecturer (P4m)."

Theme One sub-theme: Learning Management System (LMS) (online learning)

A learning management system is one of the tools used by an institution of learning to support students through the online learning process. The participants were asked to ponder on the use of LMSs at the institution. Their responses generated revealed many benefits:

A participant had the following to say:

"We use the LMS for past question papers; one can also use the chat function using the LMS, you can chat with your lecturer. It's not only question papers that are provided and, one can also see the lecturer; it's online and the other students are also online, so then we communicate via the LMS (P6f)."

Another participant said:

"Our LMS is very effective; we can access it and download the class work. It is a fun way of getting the information; you can always log onto it to get something you have missed and then get it from the LMS again (P11f)."

Another participant stated that:

"We do use the LMS, to look at PowerPoints and so, and for resources. On our LMS, you get many questions, memoranda, and question papers; also, activities and examples if you don't understand and videos (P4m)."

There were, however, problems with LMSs that prevented them from being beneficial to all students. A participant had the following to say:

“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 watching videos about the class work, but you need data (P8f).”

Another participant complained that:

“Yes, at the moment, I don't use our LMS because sometimes it doesn't work or you need data to access the LMS. I use websites the lecturer refers us to download exam papers and consult other study or class materials and I do not necessarily use the LMS (P10f).”

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the study was to examine first-year students' experience with the face-to-face learning model and blended learning model at TVET College in Western Cape South Africa.

The findings showed that most students favoured the traditional model of face-to-face over online instruction. The findings of the study show that one cannot rule out the impact of social interaction on learning. This may be why the acceptance of online learning is not entirely favoured. Quality interaction in learning gives the learner and instructor a platform to communicate in real time. The feedback one gets is essential in any learning method one subscribes to teaching and learning.

Findings from both the quantitative data and qualitative data concluded that mere technology is not as effective since integrating it into teaching approaches and providing students with interactive activities and collaboration can enhance their academic performance. Face-to-face contact remains a vital part of teaching and learning, and this conclusion emphasises that blended learning is a novel and valuable way to reach students, underscoring the combination of both face-to-face and online learning.

Regarding the usefulness of the two learning modes already mentioned above, 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 contended that the two types of learning are inextricably linked in the workplace. This finding is in line with the results of studies conducted by Tejedor et al.³⁰ The qualitative findings suggest that first-year tertiary students struggle with the transition to new ways of learning offered by tertiary institutions.

Townsend has stated that many first-year students entering HE in South Africa are not readily prepared for university studies and are, therefore, often marginalised by the institutional practices of their lack of familiarity with academic and disciplinary literacies.³¹ It was reported that the lecturers contributed to the preference, as they have not done better to match the level of interactions, expressiveness and clarity when engaging with students online. The convenience brought about by online learning is not possible due to power disruptions, costs of equipment and unfamiliarity of students and lecturers with online lesson etiquette. It seemed both lecturers and students experienced challenges still the pandemic passed.

An important issue is the fact that HE has not considered taking advantage of online learning to benefit students. Online learning provides students with various learning activities using diverse kinds of social media platforms, like Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp, which are available on current mobile phones.³² The contributions by participants here are illustrative of a missed opportunity to benefit students with blended learning.

³⁰ Santiago Tejedor et al., “Educación En Tiempos de Pandemia: Reflexiones de Alumnos y Profesores Sobre La Enseñanza Virtual Universitaria En España, Italia y Ecuador,” *Revista Latina*, no. 78 (October 29, 2020): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-2020-1466>.

³¹ Rodwell Townsend, “The National Curriculum Statement on Writing Practice Design for Grades 11 and 12: Implications for Academic Writing in Higher Education” (2010).

³² Nurmala Elmin Simbolon, “EFL Students' Perceptions of Blended Learning in English Language Course: Learning Experience and Engagement,” *Journal on English as a Foreign Language* 11, no. 1 (2021): 152–74.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Online learning and communication have become increasingly crucial and valuable in the education sector.
- Face-to-face contact remains fundamental in teaching and learning, and blended learning contributes significantly to enhancing both.
- Students entering tertiary education should be well-prepared to confidently engage in both face-to-face and online learning environments.
- The integration of face-to-face and online learning modes can be particularly beneficial, especially in the context of learning academic writing.
- If tertiary students face challenges in transitioning to new learning methodologies, it's essential that student support facilities are visible and accessible to ensure successful student support.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTION

This study is greeted with so many limitations and caution should be taken when generalising the findings of this study. Firstly, only students from one TVET College participated in this study, excluding students from other TVET Colleges in other parts of the country. Recruiting students from more than one institution and other parts of the country should be given priority in future studies. From the methodological point of view, this paper applied both quantitative and qualitative approaches in examining first-year students' experiences of learning models. The quantitative approach is the dominant approach this study employs, and limited qualitative data was used to validate and complement the findings of the quantitative data. More qualitative data should be incorporated in future studies to strengthen and validate the findings of the quantitative data in relation to students' academic writing and learning regarding blending learning applications.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed that first-year students preferred the face-to-face model, irrespective of technological advancements and the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The justification for this was that social interaction supports learning in real time. Notwithstanding, one cannot isolate the face-to-face model from blended learning. This is because both models support students' academic learning. The degree to which one learning model differs from one to another concerning students' academic performance should be given priority in future studies.

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