

An investigation into the needs of students in an online English module in Open Distance Learning (ODL)

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Abstract

The aim of this paper was to investigate whether the needs of students in an online English for Specific purposes (ESP) module in ODL were met. To that purpose, the study focused on students' need for interaction between them and lecturers in the ESP module -English for Economics and management Sciences at the University of South Africa (Unisa). Therefore, an important question was: What is the nature of students' needs regarding interaction between them and their lecturers in an ODL context? In this regard, data was collected online using qualitative methods, in a case study design, which comprised sending questionnaires to student and lecturer participants active on the ESP module; and observing interaction online. The data was triangulated with an analysis of the literature on best practices in order to corroborate the findings regarding the nature of students' need for interaction between them and lecturers. Findings suggest that although lecturers felt they were interacting with students as expected, there was little interaction between students and lecturers. In addition, most of the students' motive to interact with lecturers was valid since their needs related to what was expected in an ODL teaching and learning environment. For continuous supportive measures on students' needs regarding interaction, this paper draws on best practices to suggest possible ways of addressing the problems identified. This paper is part of a larger research project for a doctoral degree whose research topic is "Effective Teaching of An Online English Module In An ODL Environment".

Key words: English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Online English, Open Distance Learning (ODL), needs analysis, Interaction, teaching and learning.

1. Introduction

Students in an ODL environment do not have a luxury of face- to- face interaction on full time basis nor meeting their lecturers or colleagues during their studies need. As a result, they need some form of interaction to guide them towards their studies. In most cases, students' needs which may be objective or subjective may not necessarily be met by lecturers due to various reasons. Robinson (1991) describes objective needs as the ones which may align with the aims or objectives of a course, on the other hand, subjective needs may be personal needs which may not affect the whole group in a class nor related to the learning environment. For example, a need to interact with a lecturer or e-tutor to get clarity on assignments may be viewed as objective, while the need to meet with the lecturers to get advice on how to deal with a spouse, may be viewed as subjective. Although lecturers might not be able to meet some of the students' expectations, they have to, at least, address them. Ignoring students' needs, especially the need for interaction between students and lecturers may result in students who may feel disrespected thus leading to lack of interest in whatever lecturers have to offer.

Therefore, for a successful delivery of an ESP module within ODL, it is of significant importance to look into students' needs and investigate whether such needs are met. The need for interaction may be viewed as a valid service which should be offered to students without them asking. However, it is not known whether interaction between students and lecturers occurs as it should. In addition, it is also not known how and where interaction between lecturers and students should take place in an ODL environment. Lack of communication from both sides may result in misunderstandings and conflict if both parties' expectations are not met. It is under this point that the aim of this paper attempts to investigate whether students' need for interaction in an online ESP within an ODL context were met.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Needs assessment for students

According to Belcher (2006), needs assessment in ESP is the foundation on which all decisions regarding teaching and learning process should be made. Consequently, the key features of an ESP course design should be based on what students need to be taught and how to prepare them for their studies in their chosen field (Basturkmen, 2006). Holzweber (2012:29) adds "needs analysis is the most characteristic feature of ESP, which is a complex process taking not only into account what the students will have to do in a target situation but ideally also consider the learner's preferences". Furthermore, (Lourens, 1993) cautions that even if students are adults, they will still need guidance and support from lecturers; therefore, their needs should not be taken lightly. However, it is necessary to investigate how an online ESP module, which admits large numbers of students per semester, should actively address students' need for interaction. The starting point would be to review literature to look into students' needs and whether such needs relate to learning and teaching.

ESP has always been outspoken on students' needs which are viewed as a starting point when attempting to teach an ESP course. In most ODL institutions which register large numbers of students, learning should be student centred as the student is viewed as a key 'client'. In this regard, when a client pays for services, such client expects to leave satisfied; if not, a refund would have to be paid back. However, tertiary institutions do not offer refunds for services rendered- whether good or bad. This means the best approach in this context would be to do what is right for the students, starting with addressing their needs and identifying challenges and best approaches of dealing with such needs constantly.

Although in ODL, students are expected to be active learners who are self- directed and ready to do most work without face- to -face interaction with lecturers, support and continuous interaction with lecturers is still important- especially to new students who have never been exposed to an ESP course or ODL environment. To explore ESP learners' self-directed learning readiness (SDLR) and the relationship between SDLR and ESP course accomplishment, Mohammadi and Araghi (2013) conducted a study on student participants enrolled for English for students of Economy and Management in a distance learning environment. The findings revealed that half of the students' SDLR was at an average or below average level. The researchers concluded students would need to be trained to improve their SDLR that directly contributed to ESP learning in an ODL context. This finding indicates that although lecturers expect ODL students to be ready to work on their own, such students may not be ready. Moreover, new ESP students in ODL may also need guidance on how to deal with the demands balancing learning a language and specific subject matter content at the same time. As a result, they may end up confused if there is no one to assist when they come across unfamiliar content.

On the other hand, it is arguable that students may be supported but still fail; it would still be good to address students' needs first and see where it leads. Moreover, even if some needs cannot be met by lecturers or an institution, they still need to be addressed. A good example of a study which revealed objective and subjective results is Oosthuizen, Loedolff and Hamman's (2010). Amongst other factors, the study focussed on determining students' perceptions regarding their satisfaction with and the importance of certain features of learner support in ODL context. A quantitative approach was used and questionnaires were used to gather data. The findings of this study revealed that learner support areas showed low satisfaction among students. Their needs ranged from counselling, general advice, peer-group support, supportive administration staff to support in teaching and writing assignments. The researchers concluded by pointing out that students' expectations were not met, especially in areas such as administrative support and general support from the institution. However, the researchers add that such results may also be influenced by variables such as exam results, gender, failing of a module, home province and department of study.

Oosthuizen et al.'s (2010) study clearly indicates the need to interact with all stakeholders is crucial to all participants. Although some of the needs which were not met include the need for advice and counselling which may or may not be subjective. However, in Ntuli's (2008) study, there is an indication of active counselling facilities within the same institution which means students may not even be aware of – possibly because of lack of proper communication between students and the institution or ignorance from their side. Furthermore, the researchers do not indicate practical approaches to dealing with this problem after its conclusion. Therefore, a study which offers practical approaches addressing students' need for interaction in an ODL environment should be conducted, especially in a fully online ESP module.

Minnaar (2010) concurs with the idea of addressing students need for interaction in a practical. Although the findings are similar to Oosthuizen, et al.'s (2010) study, Minnaar's (2011) study which draws attention to students' need for support and human contact during the learning process. The study revealed that e-learners desperately needed support and communication from all stakeholders within an institution. These findings resulted in a recommendation that a creative approach for student support should be considered to accomplish success in delivering online modules

In some cases, lecturers assume the needs of the students could be what they have in mind without consulting their students nor conducting needs assessment. According to Ahmad (2012), lecturers should not use their intuition to identify the needs of their students but should find a way of conducting a needs analysis which can assist in designing an ESP course. With the module under study, the intake of students and registration is done at the faculty of Economic and management Sciences which means students are automatically registered for the ESP module without any profile of the students the lecturers would be dealing with. In addition, there is no way of knowing the students or interacting with them before the registration process begins.

Daweti (2003) prompts ESP researchers and practitioners to consider their intentions and expectations which may be different from students' experience during the learning process. This means, ESP practitioners may be offering content which is far from students' expectation or even grasp. A good example of expectations from lecturers which may not necessarily align with students' during the teaching and learning process is in Ntuli's (2008) study on meeting students' needs and expectations. The study draws attention to what students expect and what they are actually exposed to in an ODL context. On this point, it was concluded that students found everything planned and ready on registration- without their involvement. Ntuli (2008) suggested one of the practical ways where questionnaires regarding students' needs could be included in their application and registration packs.

In summary, a need for interaction and 'human contact' is objective and necessary in an ODL context as it is a requirement for a lecturer to give students the attention they deserve based on

the challenges they might come across in their studies. The discussion on this section indicates that needs assessment is necessary in ESP context- especially in ODL to assist in forming mutual understanding between lecturers and students. Day and Krzanowski (2011) conclude by stating that success in ESP delivery which would result in a satisfied student lies in a well conducted needs assessment.

2.2 Interaction between students and lecturers

In an Open Distance Learning (ODL) and teaching environment, interaction between students and lecturers plays a significant role hence they both need each other for successful delivery of a module or course. In an ideal world of learning and teaching, interaction between lecturers and students should be automatic. However, if students feel the distance between them and lecturers or feel neglected, then that signals problems. Although some individual needs may be viewed as subjective or objective as indicated earlier, the need for interaction between students and lecturers may be viewed as objective and valid in an ODL context.

Interaction on the current module under study takes place through email, telephone, face –to-face consultation, and on the online portal or course site known as *myUnisa*. The online portal is a platform designed to assist students to interact with materials, other students and lecturers. On this platform, there is a way of adding new information in which all participants would receive notifications on email and text messages regarding their studies. Although, students also interact informally through social networks such as whatsapp and facebook, this study will only focus on students' needs for interaction between them and lecturers.

The view of an active learner who is able to bring meaning in a well-supported learning environment is supported by the theories of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and Community of inquiry Framework (CoI) theories. However, for active learning to take place, students need support which includes continuous interaction with their lecturers. In CoI and ZPD theories, students are able to achieve the set learning outcomes in a supportive and collaborative environment which includes students, peers, and lecturers. Since the focus of the study main study is on investigating online ESP teaching, it is important to look to the literature that addresses the aspect of online interaction between students and lecturers in an ODL context.

Students in the module under study are expected to participate fully online with lecturers, e-tutors, and fellow students so they can feel they belong within the community of the ESP module. However, students have complained about lack of contact and feedback from their lecturers. One may argue that research has been conducted on this issue, however, if the problem still persists, it means it has not been resolved. This may also mean a new approach to resolving the problem should be identified and applied to the situation. Some of these

disgruntled students have even made their feelings known by expressing them on social media (Twitter and Facebook). Cooperation between students and lecturers is one crucial activity in the teaching and learning process. However, if one of them does not do their part, the outcome is usually marred with failure and disappointment.

In Paiva and Rodrigues-Junior's (2009) study, the focus was on the way students, lecturers, and peers build knowledge in online academic forums as they negotiate meanings while exchanging information with each other. The study drew from the social, teaching, and cognitive presences in CoI as it looked into the role played by the lecturer and students during the course. In their findings, the lecturer and students' messages demonstrated a sense of belonging, compliments on demonstration of knowledge on certain tasks, and harmony during discussion of content. The findings in this study demonstrate good examples of a collaborative learning environment where all participants are actively involved in achieving set goals. Although there is no indication of whether students' needs were identified beforehand, the positive interaction between students and the lecturer is what any ESP practitioner should strive for. Therefore, Paiva and Rodrigues- Junior's (2009) study is a good pointer in the direction of best practices in online interaction. The current study also anticipates to reveal whether meaningful interaction does take place between students and lecturers on the main course site which is accessed by both students, lecturers.

On the contrary, the findings of some studies conducted within the ESP environment may not demonstrate such a harmonious environment as illustrated in Lourens' (1993) study. The study on an approach to the experience of students studying English through tele-tuition focused on determining students' needs and establishing feelings of isolation from other students and the institution. In the findings, the majority of the respondents highlighted the need to interact through group meetings, open days and seminars; while some wanted to be supported by lecturers through 'encouragement, reassurance and motivation'.

Furthermore, a small number of respondents wanted guidance, detailed feedback on assessment and emotional support from both lecturers and family. The study above demonstrates the extent in which students needs for interaction vary and, at times, challenging to address. The majority of these respondents' needs seem more objective as the needs related to interaction with people involved in their studies. As indicated earlier, needs which include sending prompt feedback to students should be met even without conducting needs assessment as it is one of the core elements in any learning context, more in ODL since face- to -face interaction is limited.

According to Lephalala and Pienaar (2008:66) "feedback is one of the factors that impact profoundly on the quality of teaching and learning in an ODL context". An example related to feedback is in Kotze's (2007) study where learners' needs were not met due to delayed and sometimes lack of feedback from their lecturers. Delayed feedback or lack of it relate to lack

of support and guidance which means there is no interaction between both lecturers and students. This may also indicate lecturers were not doing what was expected of them.

On the module under study, students and lecturers are expected to interact actively on the online portal through discussion forums. Although lecturers post materials and prepare announcements on specific issues, it is not known whether active interaction does take place between them and students. Mbatha and Naidoo's (2010) study on problems hampering the collapse of distance in ODL narrates a different story. The study examined e-learning as a transformational educational tool in collapsing the transactional distance among communication science students. The study used random sampling to select and distribute questionnaires to Communication Science (COMSA) Students. The findings of this study revealed that students did not use the online portal to engage actively for the purpose which it was intended, namely to bridge the transactional distance in order to ensure increased engagement among all stakeholders.

Based on the finding above, Mbatha and Naidoo (2010) recommended in-depth study to identify the cause of lack of activity on the provided platforms. The findings in Mbatha and Naidoo's (2010) study have revealed interesting results which indicate that although students complain about lack of interaction, they might also not be doing their part as active learners. As indicated earlier, lecturers' expectation may not be the same as students' experiences during the learning process, therefore, an assumption that students will participate on *the* course site may not be what students have in mind when they complain about lack of interaction. Grobler (1991) also cautions that students' needs should not be defined too narrowly and points out that the ultimate goal in ESP learning and teaching is to empower students to study their technical subjects effectively and function in social situations using the language skills taught. It is therefore, imperative to find out from students what their idea of interaction is as it may not be what lecturers think it is.

In summary, the discussion above demonstrates lecturers cannot expect success if students' needs are not met. In addition, intuition cannot be used to identify students' needs (Ahmad, 2012). This means practitioners of ESP have to be re-educated on how to approach the new teaching expectations they come across. The current teaching and learning environment requires both lecturer and learner to be willing to go beyond classroom environment and be technology savvy to get information and use it during the learning process. However, as indicated, this can only happen once all stakeholders understand what should be done and are willing to implement the results regardless of the demands therein.

3. Research methods and design

Data was collected online using qualitative methods, in a case study design. Qualitative research methods are concerned with understanding human behaviour within which the

behaviour would occur naturally (Nunan, 2008; Seliger and Shohamy, 1990). Therefore, to investigate students' need for interactivity between them and their lecturers in an ODL context, a study was conducted in which data was collected from ten students registered for English for Economic and Management Sciences in 2016 (second semester) at Unisa and two lecturers assigned to the module. In this regard, the research question posed was 'What is the nature of students' needs regarding interaction between them and their lecturers in an ODL context?

3.1 Sampling

Purposeful sampling strategy was utilised to select participants to help in addressing the aim indicated in this study. Creswell (2012: 206) states that purposeful sampling is one of the approaches used for qualitative sampling where researchers intentionally select participants for data collection to assist in developing "a detailed understanding that might help people learn more about the phenomenon". As I was interested in developing a detailed understanding that would allow me to learn more about the need for interactivity between students and their lecturers, I intentionally selected the student participants and lecturers for data collection.

3.2 Research Instruments

The research instruments used for this study included observation check list and electronic questionnaires. The contents of the questionnaire reported about in this paper included open ended questions aimed at establishing lecturers' role in interacting with students; and the needs of students as they related to interactivity between them and their lecturers. In addition, the observation check list was used to guide the researcher on what to look for when observing interaction between students and lecturers on the online portal. Motivation for administering these two research instruments online stems from the fact that the module under study is taught totally online. Therefore, its success or failure depends on online factors. Contents of the interview questionnaires will include open ended questions aimed at eliciting information from the lecturers, e-tutors and marker participants about their teaching experiences.

4. Results

The results reported in this paper were elicited from the questionnaire and the observations carried out using the observation checklist.

4.1 Student' questionnaire

Results from student questionnaires indicated that interaction between lecturers and students was little on the online portal. For example, when the respondents were given a list of options (lecturers, students, e-tutors and other) to indicate whom they

communicated with regarding their ESP module, most of them indicated they communicated with e-tutors and other students registered in the same module but did not choose the option on lecturers. This means the respondents communicated most on the online portal with e-tutors and students; and used whats app and email to communicate with other students. However, there was no indication of communication between students and lecturers regarding the ESP module understudy even though they could still access lecturers on email.

Another point is that almost all of the respondents indicated interaction with students and e-tutors was about their studies. For example, when asked to mention issues they discussed when they communicated with their identified person(s), the responses which dominated were as follows: ‘Study related issues and clarification’; ‘tips on how to deal with certain questions’; ‘study and assignment related issues’. These responses clearly indicate the respondents’ need for interaction with the community within their registered module was objective as they are expected to seek guidance when they encounter challenges. The first two comments were similar even though one was about getting ‘clarification’ and the other one ‘tips’. They all referred to getting guidance on the content and assignment questions within their module.

Finally, the majority of respondents added that they preferred to receive comments on assignments as they helped them understand what was expected of them. An example in this regard refers to when respondents were asked what was important to them when they received their assignments from lecturers, the majority of the respondents preferred comments while a few focussed on seeing marks on their scripts. This finding means the respondents value the feedback they receive from their lecturers as this is another form of communication between them and lecturers. This also links to the guidance sought by the respondents because when they receive assignments with comments guiding or commending their work, they know they are not alone.

4.2 Lecturers’ questionnaire

Results from lecturer questionnaires revealed that respondents believed interaction between them and students took place on email and telephone. For example, when asked to estimate the time they spent participating on the online portal, the respondents’ responses varied as one spent less time compared to the other one. However, they both viewed the time spent on the online portal valuable as they addressed issues related to the module. For example, when asked to indicate what their participation entailed on the online portal, lecturers’ responses were as follows:

‘Responding to student queries on myunisa’. ‘Occasionally, I follow up outstanding assignments, check tutoring plans, manage FI concessions if any, upload study materials if needed’.

The respondent who claimed to ‘respond on student queries’ on the online portal, also indicated the time spent on the online portal was too little, as compared to the other respondent whose time was more and spent on managing administration of the course content instead of interaction with students. This means each one of them focused on what they deemed important.

Another point noted from the respondents was that most challenges regarding sending assignments or feedback late to students was due to management decisions to allow late registration/extension of assignment dates which affected turnaround time for feedback. In addition, the online marking system referred to as the ‘jRouter’ was a problem as it affected the marking progress whenever it slowed down and corrupt ‘pdf’ files submitted by students also delayed the marking process. Another challenge was hard copy assignments reached the department late as they had to be sent through assignment section for processing before they were sent to them; during that process, some scripts went astray. This indicates that although respondents valued sending feedback to students, the process also depended on the systems within the institution.

Finally, on the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to choose between online and face-to-face teaching; and they chose face-to –face teaching. This indicates that although their ESP module was fully online, they still preferred to interact with students in a classroom environment where lecturers and students could share ideas and address challenges within the same room.

4.3 Feedback from observations

Results from the observations conducted on the course site revealed that the navigation buttons were easy to access on the main page of the course site. The example below illustrates the list of the navigation topics on the course site.

- Home
- Assessment Info
- Announcements
- Discussions
- Discussion Forums
- Official Study Material
- Additional Resources
- Schedule
- FAQs
- Blog
- Drop Box

- Statistics
 - Site Info
 - Learning Units
 - Polls
 - Podcasts
 - Self Assessments
 - Gradebook
 - Meetings
 - Questions and Answers
 - Recent Announcement
-

Although the list of topics indicated above seems long, a small number of them had information (Home, announcements, Discussion forum, Official study material, Additional resources and Schedule); the rest did not contain any information. It is not clear why this list of topics did not contain any information or updates throughout the semester. However, this may mean the topics might have been automatically added within the system with the assumption that such topics were relevant for an online module.

There was also a brief welcoming message which outlined how to navigate the course site and what to expect within. All the materials (tutorial letters) utilised on the module were also posted on the course site. In addition, the Announcement page included three notices which related to due dates for portfolio of evidence and one on corrections of a section in one of the assignments. Examples of such notices are attached as Annexure A.

In summary, the findings from student and lecturer questionnaires above can shed light on the nature of students' need for interaction between them and lecturers in an ODL context. students. Although most researchers do focus on needs analysis, it is also important to look into students' specific needs within an ODL environment and lecturers' role in the process.

5. Discussion

In relation to the research question posed on this paper, namely "What is the nature of students' needs of interaction between them and their lecturers in an ODL context?", the findings above indicated the following:

One of the apparent problems on this study was little interaction between students and lecturers on the course site. Students interacted more with e-tutors on the online portal during a set time, also with other students on the online portal, social media (whats app) and email to discuss their studies. It was disappointing to learn that students seemed to be relying more on other students for guidance as indicated on Annexure B. In addition, students' interaction on social media and email may be good if they understand the content, however, there is no guarantee whether their interaction outside the course site could be beneficial. As indicated earlier,

although tertiary students are viewed as adults, they still need guidance from their lecturers (Lourens, 1993). In addition, Mohammadi and Araghi's (2013) study has also indicated that some SDLR may be at a low level hence they need proper guidance from qualified ESP practitioners. The danger of students relying on other students who may not even have correct information could lead to 'the blind leading the blind' situation. However, one may regard their interaction with e-tutors a positive since they are also qualified to guide students in their learning.

Although students' idea of interaction was participation on the course site and social media, lecturers felt communication with students on email and telephone to address students' queries was also part of interaction. It is also interesting that although student respondents were given options to indicate the people they communicated with and the mode of communication, they did not choose lecturers or communication with them on email. This is consistent with the findings of Daweti (2003) who cautions ESP practitioners regarding mismatched intentions and expectations between them and students. In this case, lecturers believe their interaction with students on email and telephone is accomplishing students' need for interaction, while students seemed to focus more on the online portal for interaction. This relates back to conducting needs assessment beforehand to come to an agreement on where and how interaction should take place.

Based on the activities, lecturers engaged on when they accessed the online portal, they viewed conducting administration work on the course site as a form of participation and interaction with their students. One could concur with that idea, since posting announcements or updating information regarding assignments is part of interaction, but it should be noted as passive interaction if notices or announcements are posted without a follow up. Such notices may draw queries in the discussion forums and it would be best to respond within that platform since announcements were posted there (an example is in Annexure B). In their study, Oosthuizen et al.'s (2010) concluded that students' expected administrative support and general support from the institution, but did not receive it. In this study, by spending time addressing technical problems and verifying submission of assignments, lecturers seemed to be taking on their workload and that of other sections, for example, assignment and ICT sections within the institution; thus leading to lack of proper interaction with their students.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that Mbatha and Naidoo's (2010) findings revealed inactive students on the course site. They believed students did not use the online portal to engage actively as intended. However, as indicated in this study, lack of participation on the course site seemed to be related to lecturers. Lecturer's preference to teach face –to- face instead of online could be one of the reasons they were not interacting actively with their students on the online portal. Although they were honest regarding their preference, their lack of interest may affect students negatively once they notice their absence in most discussion forums. In addition, lecturer who do not show interest in online activities cannot expect students to participate fully when they know they would not receive feedback as indicated on

Annexure B. Therefore, this lack of active participation from lecturers on the discussion forum should be addressed to avoid lack of trust between them and students.

Nevertheless, the findings also revealed the need for face-to-face teaching was common between lecturers and students as they both wanted the same mode of interaction during the learning and teaching process. Common expectations yield positive results; however, the challenge at this point is that the module under study was fully online; there was no face-to-face interaction. However, one is curious on what should happen in a situation where both students and lecturers see a need for face-to-face interaction. The results in Lourens' (1993) study regarding students' need for human contact, group meetings, open days and seminars also revealed the need for face-to-face interaction has always been there but was not taken into consideration. This point also links to the earlier discussion on assessment of students' needs before lectures start - if students' needs were known before registration or lectures began, maybe there would be a compromise so both sides win. However, it is also not known whether such needs would be considered since students are all over the world. I concur with one of the lecturers who suggested a face-to-face orientation on the ESP module before lessons begin so both students and lecturers can discuss and agree on what and how the processes in the module should be conducted.

Another point on common expectations includes students' preference to receiving comments on assignments while lecturers also preferred comments on the content of students' assignments. They both acknowledged the importance of comments on assignments as this could be viewed as another form of interaction between students and lecturers. As indicated in Kotze's (2007), learners were not happy with delayed and sometimes lack of feedback from their lecturers. This means the issue of receiving feedback has always been important to students. However, students may not be aware of the challenges lecturers faced regarding the slow system and bureaucracy that took place when assignments were submitted. Although feedback from lecturers may be prompt, delays due to systems within institutions and other issues beyond lecturers' control may lead to dissatisfied students. For example, if the system is down, lecturers cannot send marked assignments in time to students. This is where collaboration between different departments plays an important role as indicated in the results of Paiva and Rodrigues-Junior's (2009) study above. One may argue if there was active interaction between assignment section, ICT, lecturers, e-tutors, markers and students, there would be an improvement on some of the challenges mentioned above.

Lack of information on some topics on the navigation tool raise questions since it is not clear whether some of the inactive topics did not contain information because they were not relevant to the ESP module under study. However, one could argue, if there is no plan to load information on such topics, they should not be added on the course site. Leaving such topics without information may raise students' expectations of participation on such topics while there is nothing planned. In addition, it is also unknown if lecturers were not adding information because they were unfamiliar with the navigation of such topics or if it was due to lack of

interest. It could be argued that most of these topics could assist in responding to questions posed in the discussion forums. For example, topics such as ‘self -assessment’, ‘questions and answers’ and ‘meetings’ could form part of active interaction with students if managed well.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

Offering an ESP module fully online is problematic when lecturers have never done it before. In addition, it is more challenging when students feel they are not getting the guidance they deserve when they have paid for the service. Although interaction between students and lecturers does take place during the learning and teaching process, it is not consistent. Students interact more with e-tutors and other students on the course site and social media, while lecturers interact actively with students when they receive queries on e-mail and telephone. As indicated earlier, imparting knowledge to ESP students in their technical subject and language skills to be used effectively is the aim of ESP teaching (Grobler, 1991). Therefore, it is recommended that lecturers should interact actively with their students because they are the ones who prepare the materials, assignment questions and e-portfolios. Since lecturers already interact with students through email and telephones, it is recommended that they take turns to interact with students on the course site. In this way, students’ queries would not go unnoticed or be addressed by other students.

Furthermore, the findings of this study indicate that both students and lecturers prefer face-to-face teaching and learning as opposed to online learning which could be viewed as a common expectation in ESP teaching in ODL institutions. As indicated earlier, mismatched expectations between students and lectures can cause misunderstandings (Daweti, 2003). Therefore, this could be viewed as another starting point when planning to offer ESP module in an ODL environment. Although the module understudy is offered fully online, some form of face-to-face interaction through Webinars, video conferencing and others could be used to address the need for interaction between students and lecturers.

Another point is that comments on assignments may also be viewed as another form of interaction between students and lecturers hence there is need for prompt feedback. Although lecturers wanted feedback on assignments to reach students on time, the processes within the institution and technical issues sometimes delayed the process. Common queries such as procedures on writing or submitting assignments and assignment due dates should be addressed on the course site which would be viewed by most students. The second suggestion would be for lecturers to make use of the ‘questions and answers’ topic on the navigation button to assist with general questions which could be drawn from the discussion forum. The same question and answers or frequently asked questions (FAQ) section should be included in tutorial letters. The last suggestion is that information regarding the processes and time lines involved during submission of hard copy and online assignments should also be outlined clearly in students’ tutorial letters and course site to avoid misunderstandings.

Another finding from the study is that the navigation tool on the online portal was easily accessible and user friendly. However, most navigation buttons led to topics which did not contain information. Lack of information on such buttons also indicated lack of interaction between lecturers and students since students would expect to receive information on such topics. Therefore, to avoid questions and confusion from students, inactive topics for navigation should not be loaded on the course site.

In conclusion, results of this study regarding the nature of students' need for interaction between them and lecturers are important to ESP teaching in an ODL context because they add to the volume literature that improves our understanding of some of the pertinent challenges students experience when there is no interaction between them and lecturers. Such knowledge of best practice is needed for an effective delivery of ESP courses in ODL contexts.

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Annexure A: Announcement on the course site

Announcements (viewing announcements from the last 365 days)

All Viewing 1 - 3 of 3 items

Subject	Saved By	Modified Date	For	Beginning Date	Ending Date
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Correction of Assignment 3: Writing and referencing		21-Jul-2016 14:05	site		
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Message

A correction of assignment 3 (tutorial letter 101 p. 20) has been posted under additional resources.

Due Date: Portfolio of Evidence (Assignment 04) Portfolio of Evidence	07-Sep-2016 11:54	site
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Message

Dear ENG1512 Students,

Please note that the due date of the Portfolio of Evidence (Assignment 04), has been extended to 14 October 2016. Make sure you submit your Portfolio by 14 October 2016.

Portfolio of Evidence (Assignment 04)	04-Aug-2016 11:12	site
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Message

Dear Students,

The Portfolio of Evidence (Assignment 04) is now available on myunisa, under 'Official Study Material'. Click on **Tutorial Letter 202** to access it.

Annexure B: Discussion forum on the course site

General Subject Related Discussions: Portfolio of Evidence

This list displays all the discussions added to this topic. If you want to start a **totally new discussion topic** use the "Add New Topic" link on the previous page.

You can reply to this topic by completing the form at the bottom of this page and then click on the submit button to post your message.

Viewing 1 - 10 of 11 item(s)



Author	Message
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F J	<p>Hi</p> <p>I would like to enquire regarding the portfolio of evidence, according to</p> <p>the Tutorial letter the POE should have been posted the 5th September</p> <p>underneath the additional resources category See below extract from</p> <p>tutorial letter 04/Portfolio of Evidence questions are not included in this</p> <p>Tutorial letter. The questions will be posted on the course site (myUnisa),</p> <p>under 'Additional resources' on 05 September 2016.</p> <p>Can anyone kindly advise on this?</p>
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(2016-09-21 11:40:41)

R Hi Guys,

Has anyone got an idea of how or where to find the semester 2 portfolio of evidence (POE). It is supposed to be under the Additional resources link as of the 5th September but it's not. Kindly assist please,

Regards,

(2016-10-09 15:04:53)

Hi

F

V I would like to enquire regarding the portfolio of evidence, according to the Tutorial letter the POE

should have been posted the 5th September underneath the additional recourses category

(2016-10-06 19:49:29)

L

Hi everyone How to download Plagiarism Declaration Form? Anyone help
please 0781473487 on Whatsapp (2016-10-05 15:01:18)

T

Hi good people! help please I don't see the portfolio here. Anyone can help (2016-10-03 09:51:16)

J

The POE is in tutorial 202 posted under official study material.

The plagiarism declaration form is posted under additional resources.

(2016-09-27 08:11:33)

F J

Hi

I'm doing Eng1512/101, that doesn't make sense why I should use 202 then?

(2016-09-27 07:48:24)

N M

Please help me I do not see where can I find potifol questions from.

(2016-09-26 13:21:34)

P M

Hi guys can someone assist with the plagiarism declaration form please, on the assignment 4 there is a line that says Save your answers (including the plagiarism declaration form-see end of this document) in

one document and upload it on myUnisa. Please assist

(2016-09-25 21:37:31)

Z NXUMALO

Guys find it under official study material tut letter 202

(2016-09-24 07:47:09)

D MASIPA

HI

Can someone help me, i have scored same marks at my 2 assignments, writing

Essay (portfolio) do i have to choose one or should i write about both

"Write a paragraph of approximately 150 words in which you discuss your

assignments for which you scored the highest mark and include the aspects: what

the assignment was about, why you think you performed the way you did, what you

would change or reinforce from the experience."

(2016-09-23 11:33:59)