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Abstract

Since the establishment of the Self-Access Learning Centre (SALC) at the University of Technology, Jamaica (UTech, Ja.), students, particularly those enrolled in academic writing modules, have been utilising it to improve their communicative competence. However, the centre has recently encountered various challenges, chief among which are the lack of resources and restricted access to students, pushing the centre to the brink of obsolescence. This led to a revisioning of the centre, a central part of which is the creation of a virtual learner-driven SALC that focuses on the key areas in English and writing that students find challenging. For such a centre to be effective, it needs to be founded on students' demographic, psychographic and behavioural traits.

Using the results of a cross-sectional survey of 278 UTech, Ja. students, we present a learner profile of the typical student and the implications of such a profile for the creation of the virtual SALC. The results reveal that the typical student is teacher-dependent, extrinsically motivated and possesses low levels of academic exertion, low capacities for independent work and high levels of technology consumption. Based on this profile, heavy use of images, games and gamification elements, auto-rated activities, and interactive tutorials are central to the VSALC.

Keywords: Virtual Self-Access Learning Centre, Higher Education, learner profiles, UTech, Jamaica.

Contextual Background

Writing courses are a part of every undergraduate degree in universities worldwide. However, it has long been acknowledged that students do not get enough exposure due to a limited number of hours allotted to these courses. Consequently, Self-Access Learning Centres (SALCs) have been trying to fill the gap for some time now and have been found to

be instrumental in assisting tertiary-level students in improving their communicative competence. Kongchan and Darasawang (2015) note that because face-to-face English classes provide limited exposure to the teaching and learning of English, establishing a self-access centre is crucial, as it attempts to provide more out-of-class English exposure for students. In a bid to assist students, the use of grammar laboratories has increased in Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) worldwide. These units, a form of self-access language learning tools, are free for learners to access beyond their academic schedule, and are known to provide writing and grammar support for learners at a pace directed by the learners themselves (Andersson & Nakahashi, 2017; LaClare & Franz, 2013).

The UTech, Ja. SALC

The Self-Access Learning Centre (SALC) at the University of Technology, Jamaica (UTech, Ja.), was established in 1999, and has provided students with a non-threatening space to improve their English language skills, via monitored, individualised programmes of self-instruction. The SALC is particularly important considering the grave language and communication deficiency of UTech, Ja. students. Smith et al. (2015), who studied students' performance on the university's Proficiency Test in English (PTE), found that students struggle with the English language, and continue to produce sub-standard performances in writing. Additionally, research conducted by Smith and Stewart-McKoy (2017, 2019) and Burris and Burris-Melville (2020) detail the types and nature of errors students' writing, revealing that the two main error types are grammatical and lexical errors.

Nonetheless, despite the recognized significance of the UTech, Ja. SALC in assisting students with their language challenges, it has fallen on some tough times since its development, a situation faced by SALCs globally (Thompson, 2014; Gromik, 2015). Several interconnected factors, such as a lack of funding and up-to-date resources, limited staffing, and accessibility to students, as well as dwindling student numbers due to a shift in learners' needs, have prevented the SALC from achieving its expected goals. Added to this, is the constant push and pull to explore the virtual space more in Higher Education and expand the online offerings and presence of the university. Our decision to develop a virtual self-access learning space as a complement to the physical SALC was influenced by these factors, which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, the pandemic forced many educational institutions to create online versions to complement their physical SALCs (see Mynard et al, 2020).

Why a VSALC?

Virtual SALCs, which take various formats are becoming increasingly popular, and by their very nature, allow for the incorporation of a variety of technologies, while still maintaining and promoting individualised and independent learning. The University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, for example, offers learners the opportunity to consult language advisers online and to access services such as webinars and etutored online courses (Marazzi, 2019). Kanda University of International Studies offers students a colourful and inviting website, accessible 24/7, once they are connected to the internet (Rubesch & Barrs, 2014). According to Rubesch and Barrs (2014), the website makes use of several technologies such as social media sites, QR (quick response) codes, an online reservation system and resource archives.

There are many benefits to establishing a VSALC. It not only affords a level of flexibility and increases the reach of the centre to students who were unable to make it to the physical centre, but it also helps in fostering autonomous learning and allows for the diversification of the language resources available to students, thereby eliminating some of the key challenges of the physical SALC.

In light of the many possibilities, what would be the features of the UTech, Ja. VSALC? Educational systems worldwide, including that of Jamaica, at the various levels, have been plagued by 'the teacher knows best syndrome', and educators and administrators alike have been guilty of making decisions about the development of courses, without consideration of students' backgrounds and specific needs. We, as educators, have also been guilty of using a variety of technologies in our classes based solely on the assumption that since our students are living in a technological age, they are familiar with, and know how to use these technologies.

However, more and more, researchers have been calling attention to the need for students to be more involved in the creation of teaching resources and activities, and importantly, for educators to profile their students. This is extremely important when developing an online learning space. Couros (2019) proposes that for students to achieve academic success, teachers must learn about them, not just finding out how they learn, but also finding out who they are, and given the many ways in which students differ, Bienkowski et al. (2012) explain that student profiling allows for the provision of learning environments which are more tailored towards students' learning needs.

Our Research Focus

Our starting point was therefore to ask the students what they wanted. Students pursuing entry-level writing courses responded to a survey, from which we were able to answer the following questions:

1. *What is the typical learner profile of students pursuing writing courses at UTech, Ja.?*
2. *How can this learner profile be used to inform the design of a virtual self-access learning centre for students in writing courses at UTech, Ja.?*

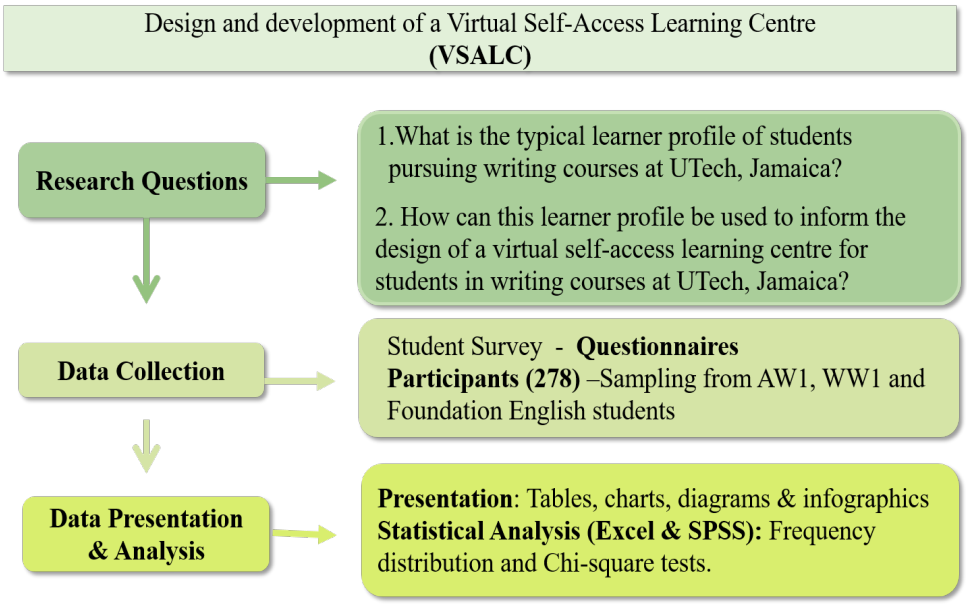
Using the results of the survey, a profile of the typical UTech, Ja. learner, who will be the end user of the platform, emerged. From this, we created three personas, who we have called Hands-on Haley, Self-conscious Sonya, and Fun-loving Fabian. The remaining sections of the paper detail the methodology and results, and discuss how the emerging profile and personas would impact the design of the VSALC.

Methodology

This paper presents the first phase of a research project that utilises a learner experience design (LXD) approach. Learner experience design is an interdisciplinary approach to designing and developing learning solutions. LXD incorporates both instructional design strategies and user experience design techniques (Chang & Kuwata, 2020; Quintana et al., 2020; Robinson & Harrison, 2017). This phase, the problem identification phase, involves the collection, presentation and analysis of data associated with the learner. Following, is a pictorial summary of the research design for Phase I:

Figure 1

Study Design



The Instrument

A five-section questionnaire was designed to collect the necessary information on the learners. Section A, which comprised six questions, targeted demographic data. In Section B of the questionnaire, participants were required to respond to questions that addressed their learning styles and instructional preferences. Section C of the instrument sought to ascertain students' engagement with the English language, while their technology competence was the focus of Section D. The last section (Section E) examined participants' online learning needs, and what they would need to best facilitate them in a virtual centre. The instrument made use of a combination of multiple-choice items, rating, and matrix-type questions.

Participants and Sampling

The target population was undergraduate students pursuing entry-level writing courses at UTech, Ja. We employed purposive sampling techniques to select a sample of 278 students registered in Academic Writing I (AWI), Foundation/Developmental English and Writing Workshop I (WWI)[1] collectively.

[1] Foundation/Developmental English is a Basic Writing module taken by students who are unsuccessful in the Proficiency Test in English. Writing Workshop I is a compulsory writing module taken by students in the BA in Communication Arts and Technology, and the BSc. in Animation Production and Development. Until a year ago, all other undergraduate students took Academic Writing I.

Ethical Considerations

We applied for, and obtained ethical clearance from the University's Ethics Committee, after which we proceeded with the data collection. Prior to distributing the questionnaire, we provided each student with a consent form soliciting their willingness to complete the questionnaire. Furthermore, we took the relevant steps to preserve the anonymity of the participants and confidentiality of the information provided. The students were not required to share any identifying information about themselves, and we immediately placed the questionnaires into sealed envelopes, after distributing and collecting them. We then entered the data onto a computer which was password protected.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data were collected in April 2016. We selected and visited classes from the three modules[2], where we briefed the students about the project and their role as participants in the project. Only students who indicated a willingness to participate were given the questionnaire to complete. The students were given approximately 20 minutes to complete and submit the questionnaire to the representative from the research team.

After the questionnaires were collected, the data were cleaned, basic coding was done, and the data were then entered into an Excel worksheet for preliminary analysis. The data were then imported into version 24 of the SPSS software, where frequency distribution and Chi-Square commands were run. The results of the analysis are presented using graphs, charts, and text descriptions. Additionally, using the research findings, the learner profile, as well as primary and secondary student personas, are presented via infographics and text descriptions.

Results

Demographic Data

Of the total of 278 students who completed the survey, 62% were female and 38% were males. Sixty-one percent (61%) of them were from Year 1, 26% were from Year 2, 9% were from Year 3 and 4% were from Year 4 and above. In terms of age ranges, 35% of the participants were under age twenty, 54% of them were between 20 to 24 years of age, 6% of them were between 25 to 29 years of age, 3% of them were between 30 to 34 years of age and 2% of the participants were between 35 to 39 years of age. The participants were both

[2] The term module is used by UTech, Ja. in reference to each individual course taken by students.

part-time (8%) and full-time (92%) students. Regarding participants' employment status, 81% were unemployed, while the remaining 19% were employed.

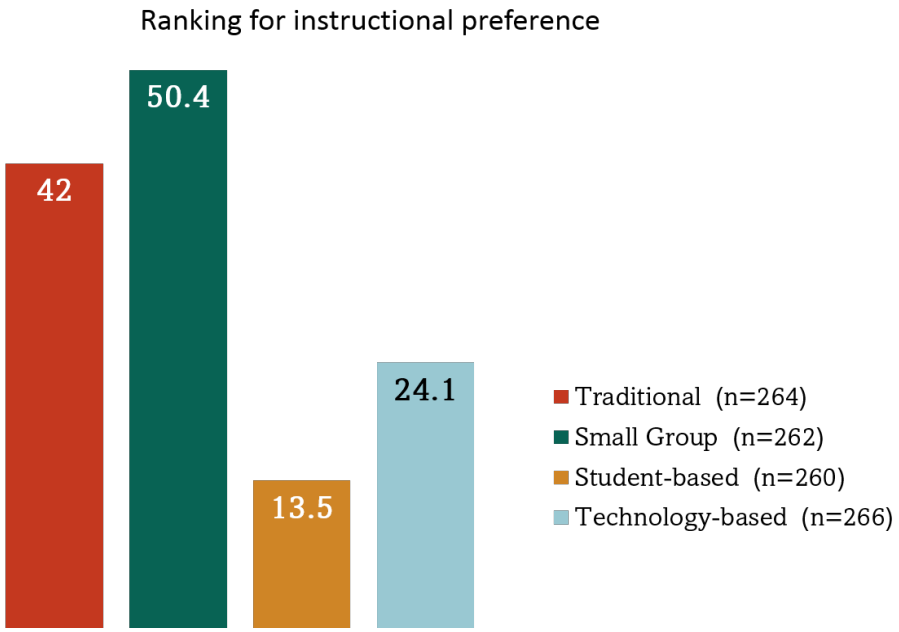
The participants came from all eight faculties/colleges, with the largest percentage (45%) coming from the College of Business and Management (CoBaM). Participants from the Faculty of Engineering and Computing (FENC) accounted for 19%, followed by the College of Health Sciences (CoHS) with 13%. The Faculty of Education and Liberal Studies (FELS) with 8%, the Faculty of the Built Environment (FoBE) with 5%, the Faculty of Law (FoL) with 1%, the Faculty of Science and Sports (FoSS) with 5%, and the Joint Colleges of Medicine, Oral Health and Veterinary Sciences with 4%, accounted for the remaining participants.

Instructional Preference

Students were asked to rank their instructional preference. The highest rankings show that 50.4% preferred small group instruction (tutorials and one-on-one discussions), followed by 42% with a preference for traditional instruction (lectures and textbooks). Technology based instructional preference (CD, blended, online mobile) accounted for 24.1%, and 13.5% preferred student-based instruction (peer teaching) (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Instructional Preference

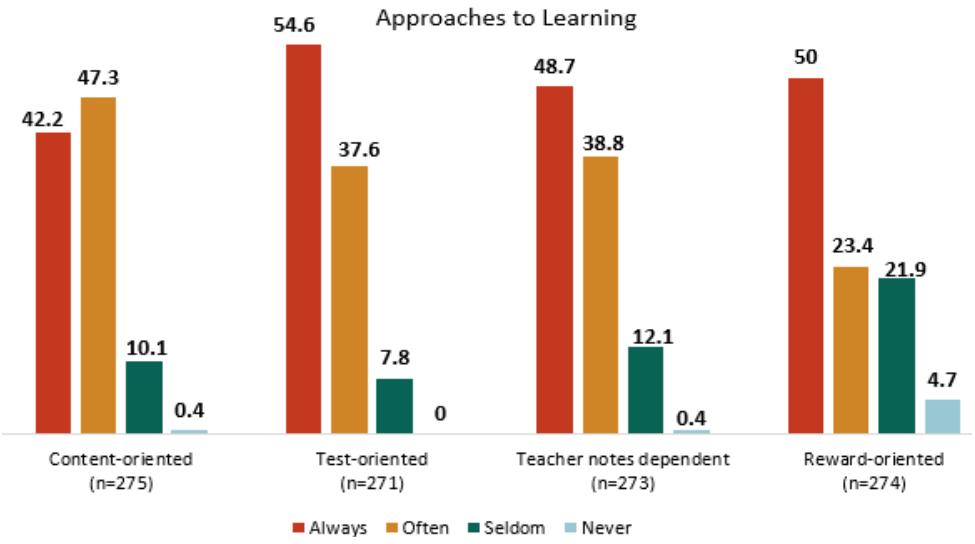


In terms of the students' approaches to learning, if we combine respondents who responded with 'always' and 'often' to the given statements, the findings reveal that the

students are highly test-oriented (92.2%), consistently zooming in on information given about tests and exams. They are also content-oriented (89.5%) and teacher-dependent (87.5%), relying heavily on the lecture notes and other resources from the lecturer. Additionally, the results suggest that these students enjoy being rewarded when they invest their time and effort into a piece of work (73.4%) (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Approaches to learning

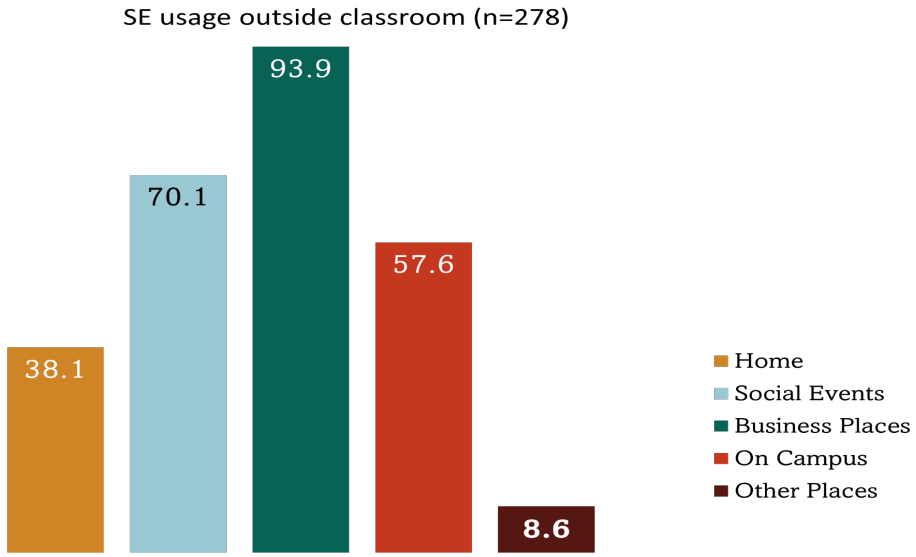


English Language Profile

Jamaican Creole is used as the predominant language in the home by most of the respondents (75.7%), while 23.5% indicated using Jamaican English mainly. When asked where outside of the classroom they made an effort to use Standard English (SE), almost all the respondents (93.9%) reported making an effort to use SE in business places, 57% indicated using it at social events, 57.6% use it on campus, and 38.1% stated that they made an effort to use SE at home. Standard English is reportedly used in other places by 8.6% of the respondents. Please see Figure 4 for results.

Figure 4

Standard English use beyond the classroom



We wanted to find out whether students engaged in blog writing, wiki developments and writing for the newspaper. Only 11%, 1.9% and 2.8% of the respondents respectively, indicated that they engage in these types of writing, outside of class. We also asked whether students read a variety of material outside of class. These numbers were significantly higher, with 75.9%, 61%, and 57.3% of the participants reporting that they read newspapers, blogs, and magazines respectively. Furthermore, 69.7% of the participants said they read fiction, while only 29.7% of them read non-fiction. Figures 5 and 6 show these results.

Figure 5

Writing Activities Out of Class

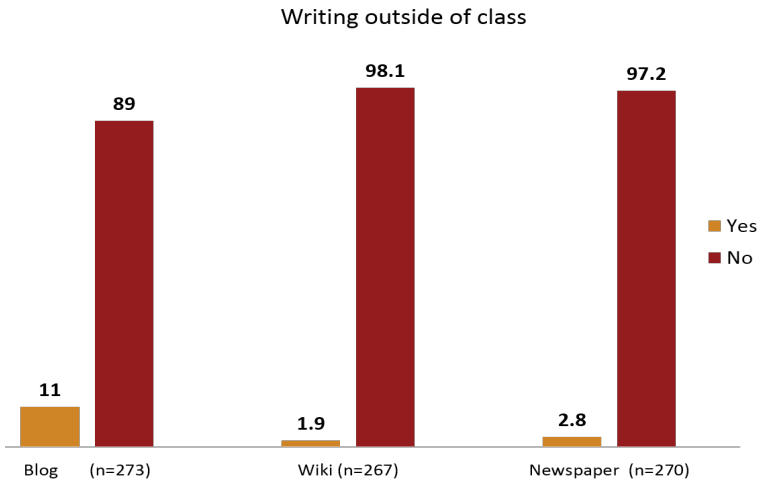
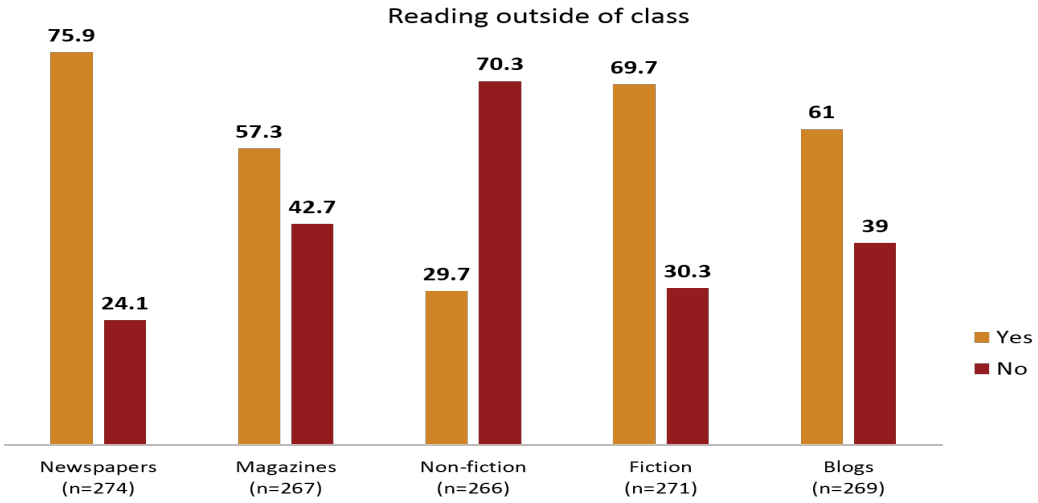


Figure 6

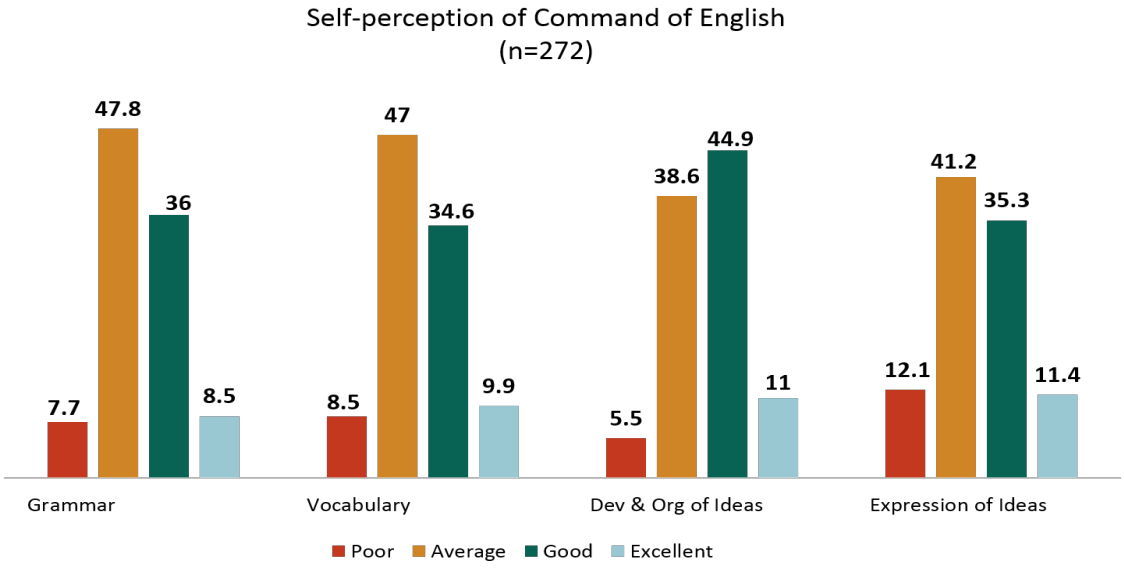
Reading Activities Out of Class



The study reveals that students do not perceive themselves as having a good command of the English language. Except for the development and organisation of ideas where most of the students (44.9%) rated themselves as good, the students considered their command of English grammar, vocabulary, and expression of ideas as average, with 47.8%, 47% and 41.2% respectively. See Figure 7 for a breakdown of these ratings.

Figure 7

Self-perception of Command of English

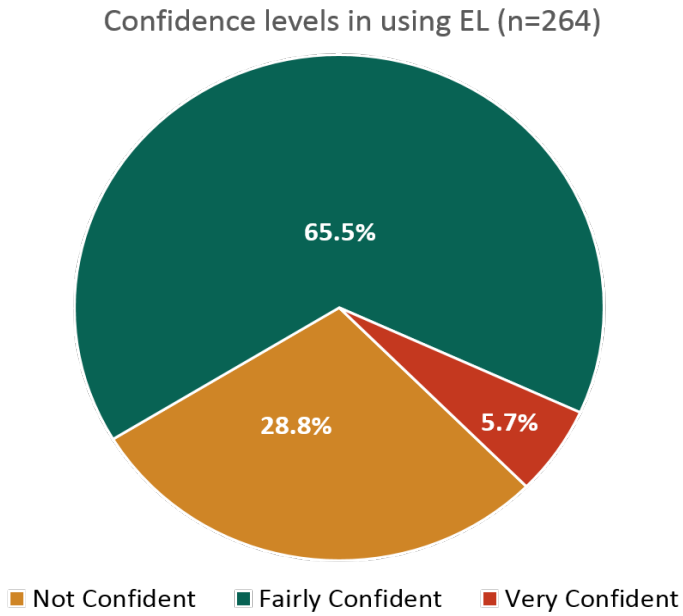


With students' rating of their competence in English, it is not surprising that only 5.7% of them said they are very confident in their use of English, which means that they can identify and correct errors in their work easily, and are willing to show their work and have

others critique it. Most of the students (65.5%) considered themselves to be fairly confident, indicating an ability to correct their work, if the errors are identified for them, and a willingness to show their work only after several reviews by experts and peers. The remaining 28.8% of the students are not at all confident in using English. They therefore have difficulty identifying and correcting errors in their work, and have no desire to show their work to anyone (See Figure 8).

Figure 8

Confidence Levels in using English



When it comes to whom students felt most confident with in correcting their work, the two highest figures feature the lecturer of the module, where 41.4% prefers the lecturer only, while 41% favour the lecturer and classmate. Interestingly, some students indicated a preference for another lecturer (8%) to correct their work, while others prefer a peer who is not in their class (7%) over their own classmates (2.6%). Please see Figure 9 for results.

Figure 9

Preference for Correction of Written Work

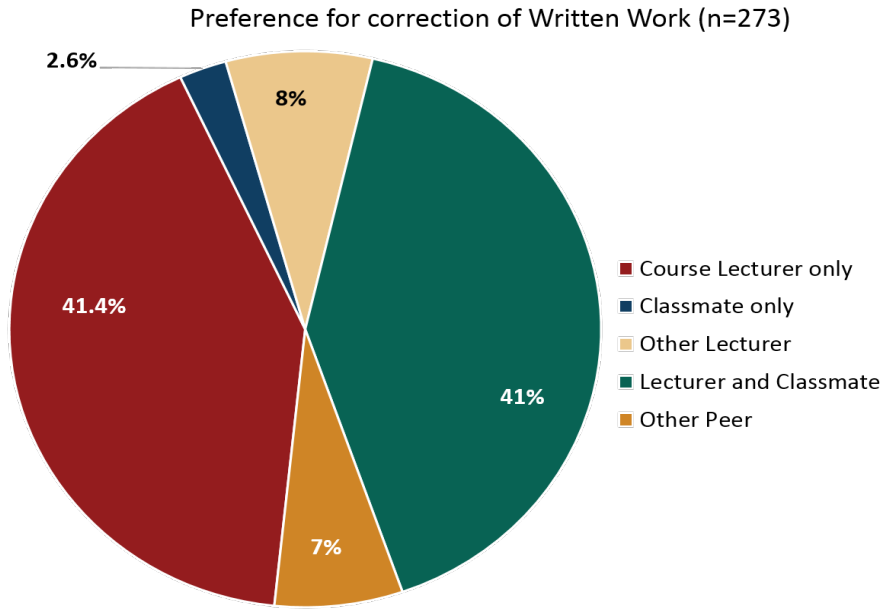
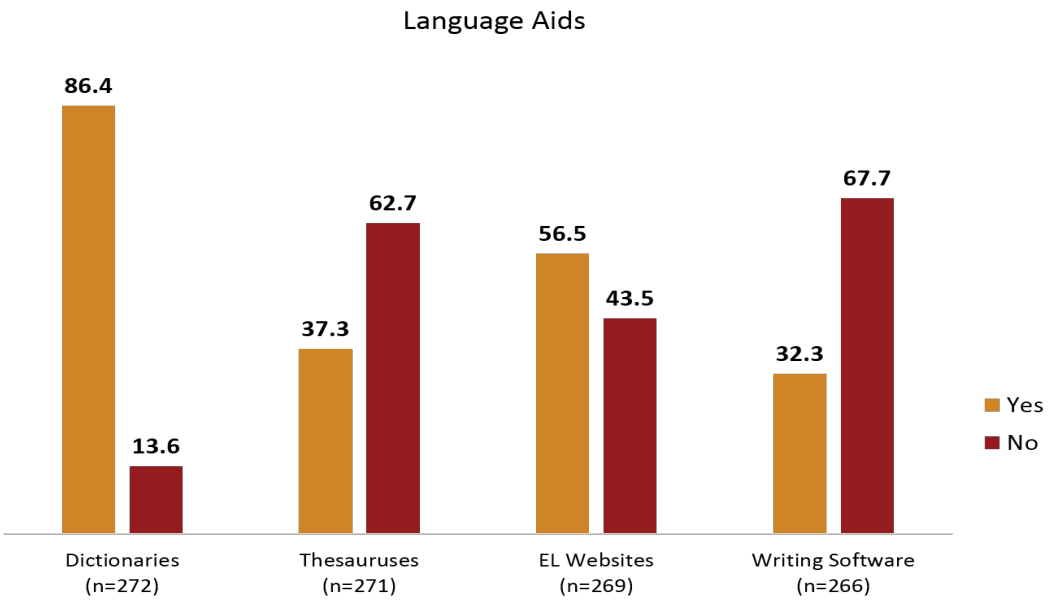


Figure 10 shows that respondents use a variety of language aids to assist them in completing their work. Dictionaries are used by 86.4% of the respondents, English Language websites by 56.5%, thesauruses 37.3% and 32.3% of the respondents utilised language writing software.

Figure 10

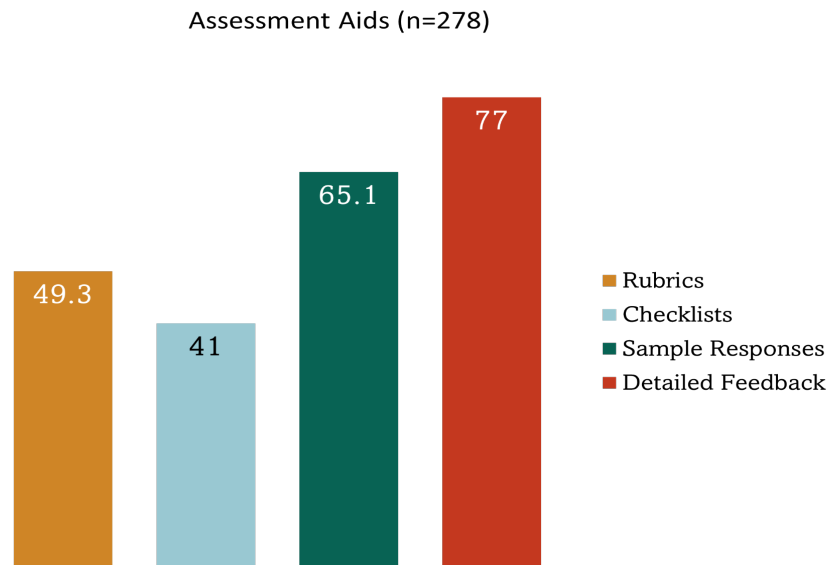
Language Aids used by Students



As illustrated in Figure 11, most of the students believe that detailed feedback (77%) and sample responses (65.1%) would help them in developing their English language skills. Almost half of the students (49.3%) consider rubrics to be important, while 41% of them value checklists.

Figure 11

Assessment Aids Students Require

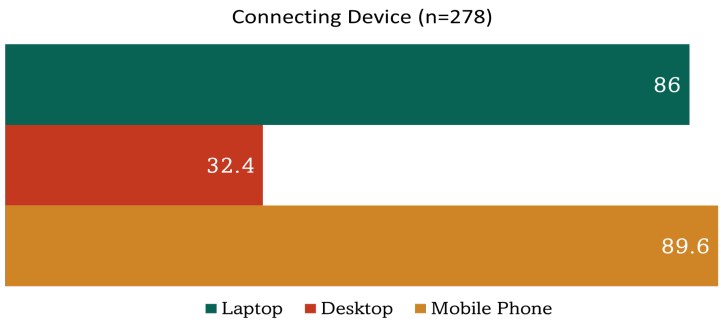


Technology Competence Profile

Almost all participants (93.4%) claimed that they have access to reliable internet, and 89.9% of them connect to the internet wirelessly. Mobile phones are used by 89.6% of the students as the main connecting device, followed by laptops (86%) and desktop computers (32.4%). The results are given in Figure 12.

Figure 12

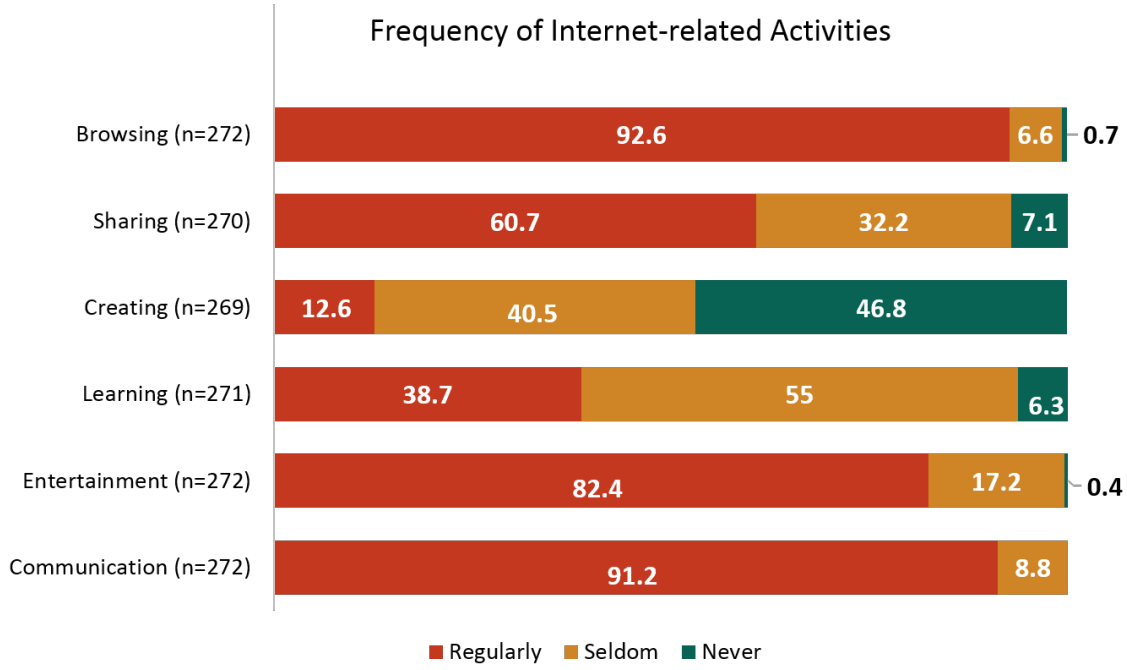
Students' Connecting Device



We also asked students to indicate how often they carry out a number of internet-related activities. Activities that most of them perform regularly include browsing (92.6%), communicating with others (91.2%), entertaining themselves (82.4%), and the sharing of files (60.7%). Most of the students seldom perform activities related to learning on the internet, while almost half of them (46.8%) never use the internet for digital content creation. The details are presented in Figure 13.

Figure 13

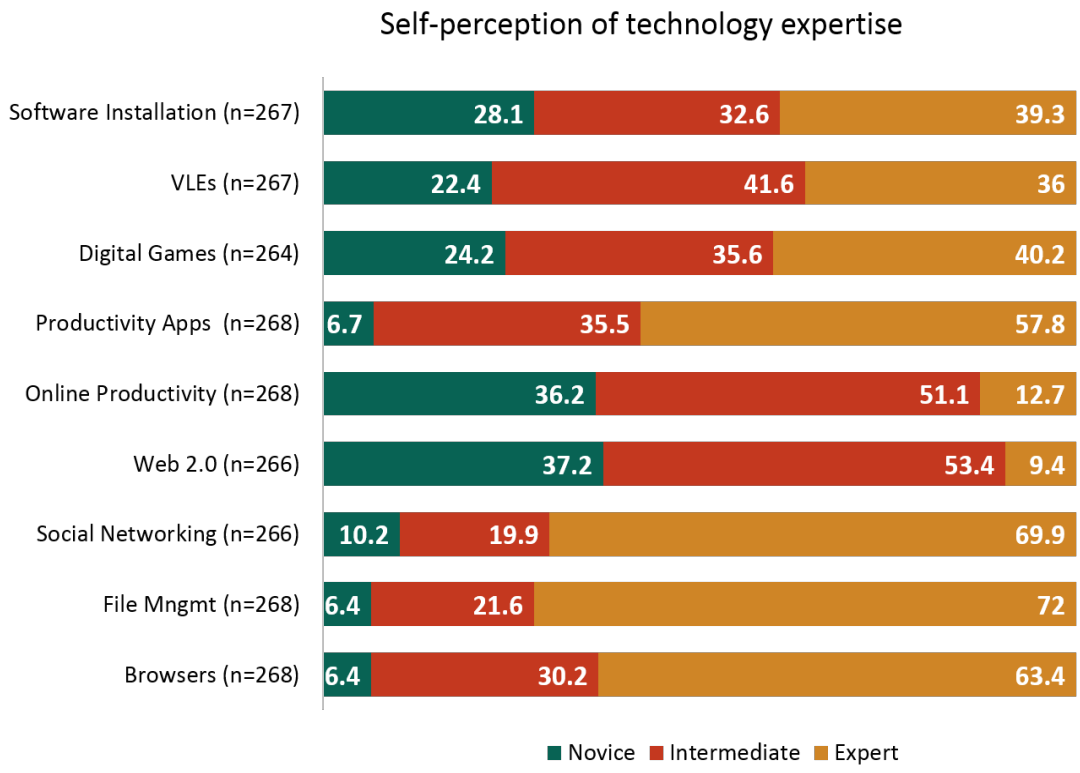
Frequency of Internet-related Activities



Respondents also rated their skill level for nine technology-related activities. The majority of them rated themselves as experts on six of these activities - file management (72%), social networking (69.9%), using browsers (63.4%), and productivity apps (57.8%), digital games (40.2%), as well as software installation (39.3%). As it relates to the use of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs), online productivity, and Web 2.0 tools, most students thought they possessed an intermediate skill level, with 41.6%, 51.1%, and 53.4% respectively. Figure 14 shows these results.

Figure 14

Self-perception of Technology Expertise



Online Learning Needs

A little more than half (53.9%) of the respondents indicated that they would most definitely consider using an online self-access learning centre to assist them with their English, while 38.4% of the respondents said that they would more than likely consider using such a centre. The remaining 7.7% of the respondents would not consider the centre.

The majority of the respondents (74.1%) indicated a willingness to spend between 1 and 3 hours in the virtual self-access centre learning on a daily basis, while 19.5% of them were willing to spend less than an hour in the centre daily. A smaller number of students (6.4%) would be willing to spend more than three hours daily in the centre. See Figure 15 for the results.

Figure 15

VSALC Interest and Time Willing to Spend

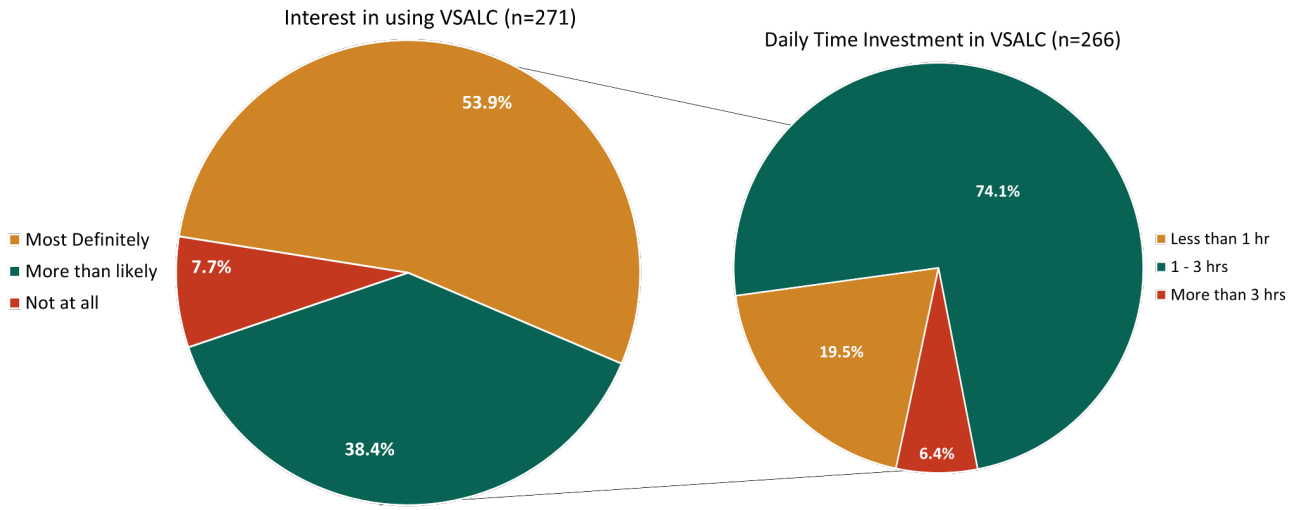
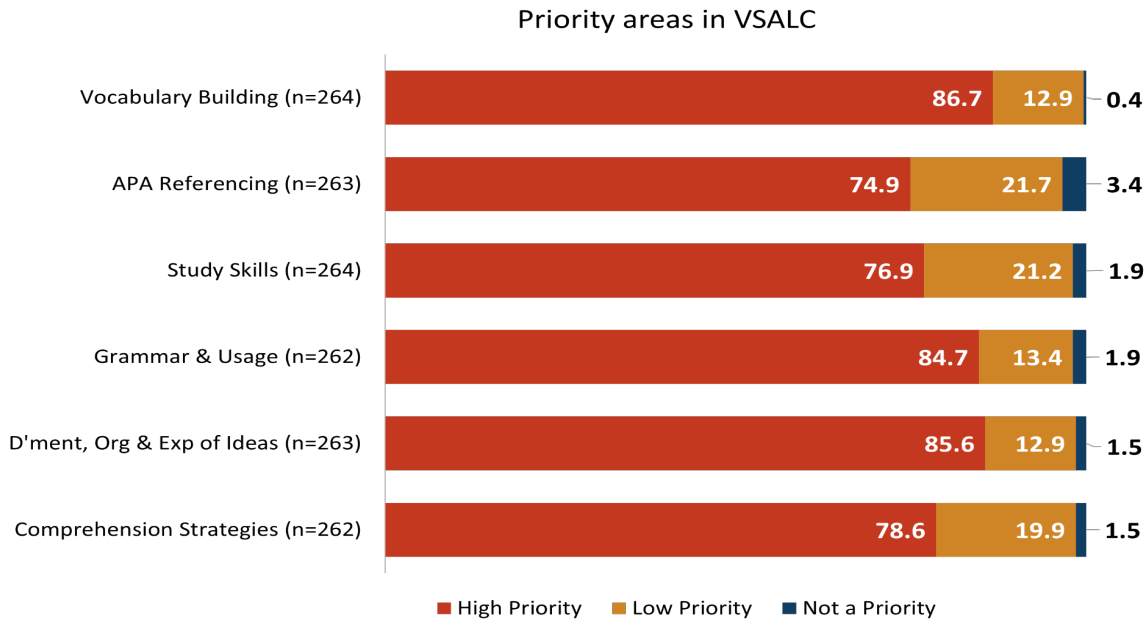


Figure 16, which follows, presents students' ranking of six language components in terms of level of priority. The results show that all the language components were ranked as a high level of priority by most of the students – vocabulary building (86.7%), development, organisation and expression of ideas (85.6%), grammar and usage (84.7%), comprehension strategies (78.6%), study skills (76.9%) and APA referencing (74.9%).

Figure 16

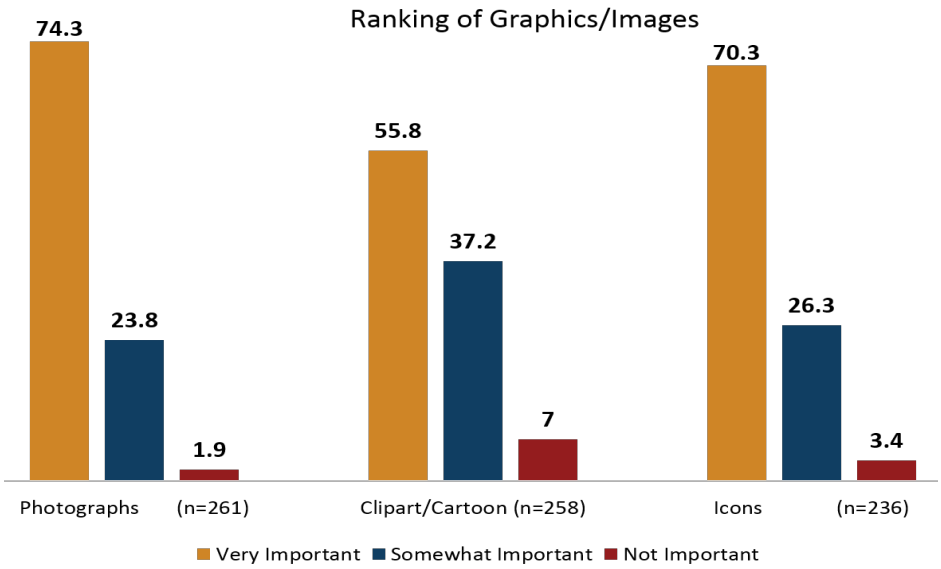
Priority Areas in the VSALC



Graphics and images are considered as a particularly important component of a virtual centre by most of the respondents, with 74.3%, 70.3% and 55.8% of them respectively, rating photographs, icons and clipart/cartoons to be very important. Figure 17 shows these results.

Figure 17

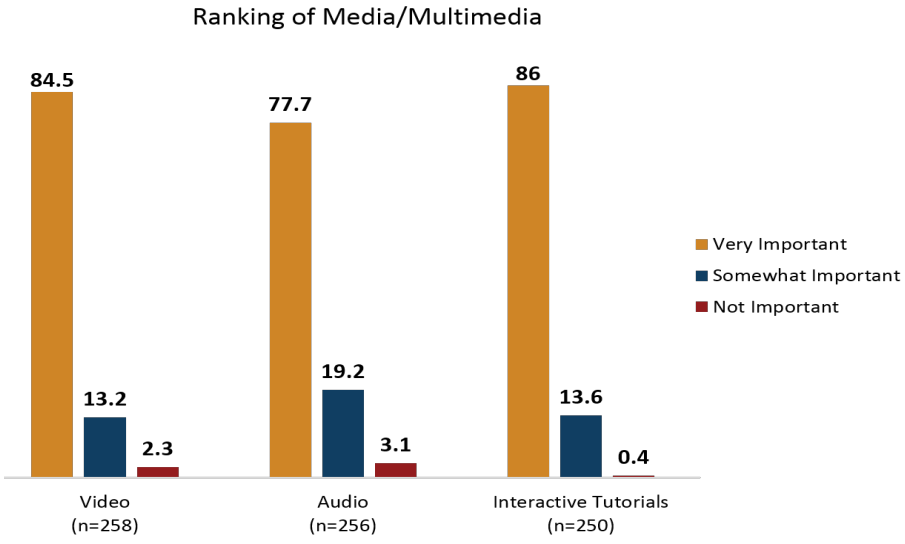
Students' Ranking of Images/Graphics



The chart in Figure 18 makes clear that not only do students consider images an important component of a virtual centre, but they also believe multimedia is pivotal. Most of the students consider interactive tutorials (86%), videos (84.5) and audio (77.7%) as very important to the virtual centre.

Figure 18

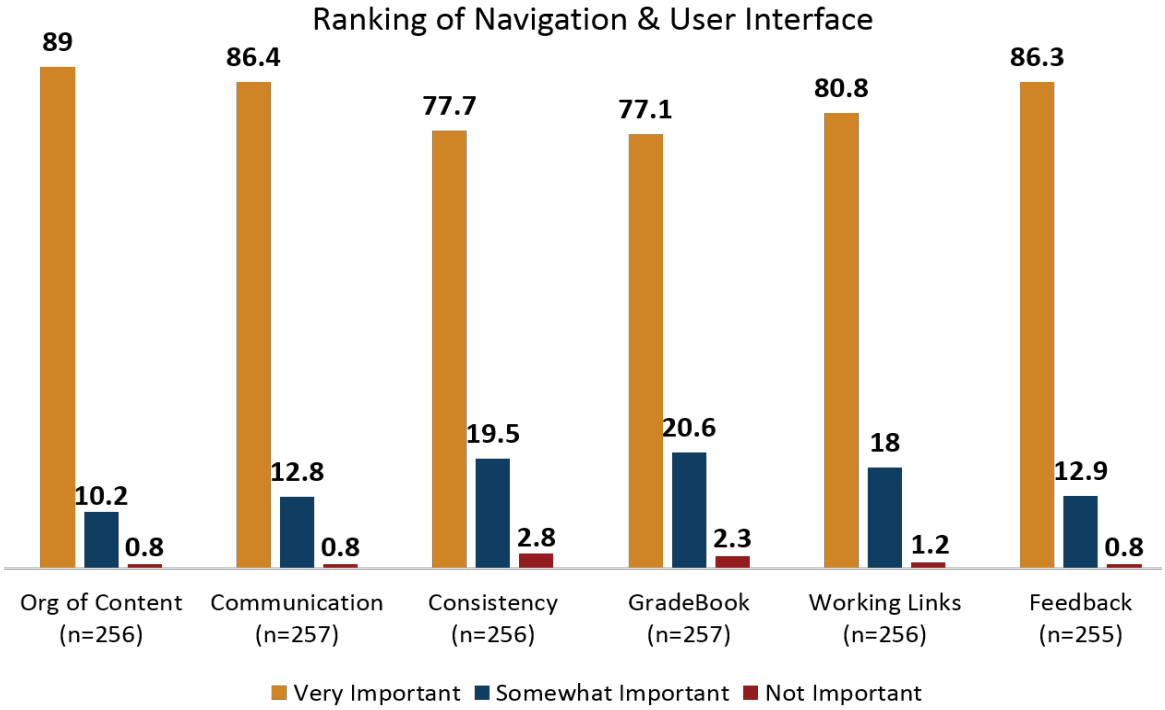
Students' Ranking of Multimedia



In Figure 19 we see students' ratings of six components related to navigation and user interface. The majority of the participants indicated that all six categories: organisation of content (89%), feedback (86.3%), communication (86.4%), working links (80.8%), consistency in visual aesthetics (77.7%), and the gradebook (77.1%) are very important to a virtual centre.

Figure 19

Students' Ranking of Navigation and Interface



Not surprisingly, both teaching and technical support are seen as being necessary components of a virtual centre. Over 80% of the respondents indicated that having teaching support (87.9%) and technical support (80.7%) is very important. None of the respondents indicated that these two categories of support are unimportant.

The UTech, Ja. Student Profile

Based on the results, what does the learner profile of the typical student who is engaged in writing courses at UTech, Ja. look like? What we found was that irrespective of sex, the typical student is full-time, unemployed, and young, belonging to the 20-24 age group. This student is more inclined to one-on-one discussions and tutorials as the instructional mode of learning. S/he is also teacher-dependent, extrinsically motivated, and

possesses low levels of academic exertion, low capacities for independent work, and high levels of technology consumption.

As it pertains to the language profile, the typical learner is a native speaker of Jamaican Creole, who uses Standard Jamaican English in the classroom, and makes an effort to also use it mainly in business places and at social events. S/he tends to read a variety of material outside of the classroom, but is not likely to participate in out-of-class writing activities. Importantly, this student considers himself/herself as possessing an average command of, and confidence in the English language.

Although s/he is not opposed to peers' correction of work completed, there is a preference for the class teacher to do the correction. In completing language-related writing assignments, this student tends to rely more on language aids such as dictionaries and English Language websites, but not so much on thesauruses and writing software. This learner considers detailed feedback and sample responses as critical in helping in the development of his/her English language skills.

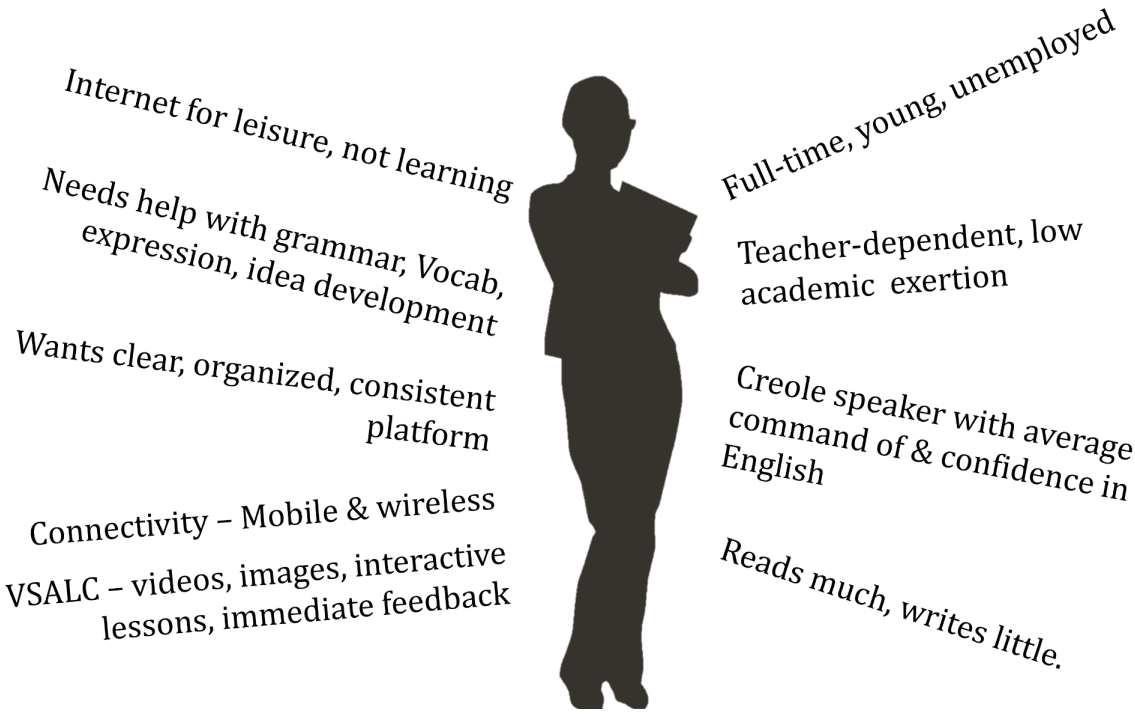
As it relates to the student's internet connectivity, mobile phones are the main connecting device, which automatically means that the main connectivity type is wireless. Nonetheless, the typical student reports having access to reliable internet connection, and is connected most of the time. The internet-related activities of this student vary, but s/he regularly browses, shares files, and engages in basic communication and entertainment activities such as watching movies, listening to music, and playing online games. S/he seldom uses the internet for learning or digital content creation. On the one hand, s/he perceives himself/herself as an expert in browsing, social networking, file management and software installation. On the other hand, s/he considers himself/herself as possessing intermediate skills in Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs), such as Moodle and Schoology, and Web 2.0 and online productivity tools.

Notably, the typical UTech, Ja. student is interested in a virtual self-access learning centre, and is willing to spend 1 to 3 hours daily in such a centre, to improve his/her English Language skills. Moreover, s/he considers vocabulary building, APA referencing, study skills, grammar and usage, development, organisation and expression of ideas, and comprehension strategies, all as priority areas in the design and development of a VSALC. This learner also desires a centre that makes heavy use of videos, interactive tutorials, photographs, and icons, along with good organisation, clear communication, working links, and consistency in visual aesthetics. The centre would also need to have an active gradebook

and provide immediate and detailed feedback. Figure 20 presents a pictorial profile of the typical student.

Figure 20

Profile of the Typical UTech, Ja. Student



Unsurprisingly, the data was not homogeneous; there is a small number of students who do not fit the emerging profile. We have therefore created three personas[3] (one primary and two secondary) to fully account for the different learners. Together, they account for 98% of the data. Meet Self-conscious Sonya, Hands-on Haley, and Fun-loving Fabian.

Sonya represents 81% of the sample population and would be the VSALC primary end-user. Haley and Fabian represent 9% and 8% respectively and would be secondary users of the platform. The main differences among the three lie in their English language confidence levels, their perception of their English language skills, and their self-views about their technology skills. Sonya rates herself as having average competence in all areas of English and is fairly confident in using the language; Haley considers herself as having a very good command of English, and is very confident in using the language; and Fabian is not at all confident in his use of the language, maybe because he rates his command as poor. As it

[3] We use the students' perception of their English Language competence, specifically Grammar as the starting point for the persona development, since our previous research shows that this is the most challenging area for students.

relates to their technology expertise, the major difference among the personas has to do with the learning management system. Both Sonya and Haley rate themselves as intermediate users, while Fabian views himself as a novice user. Figures 21, 22, and 23 detail their persona profiles.

Figure 21

Persona: Self-conscious Sonya

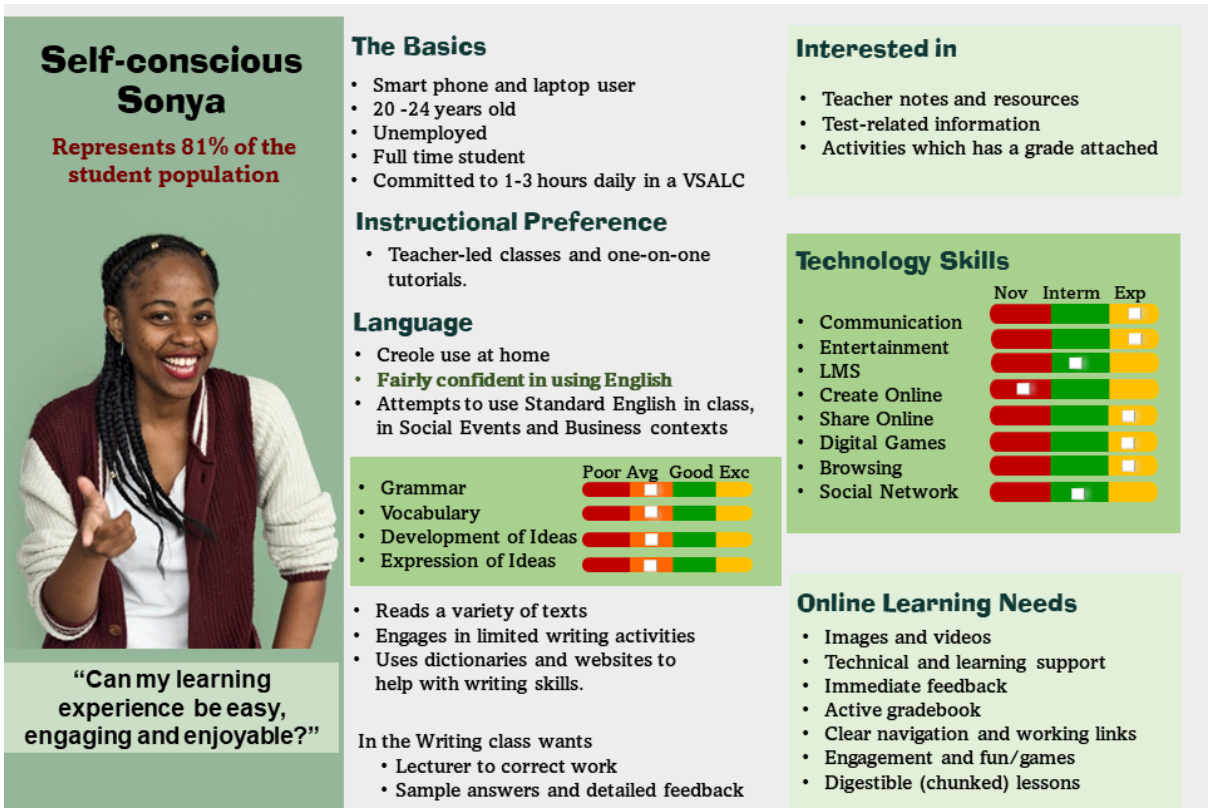


Figure 22

Persona: Hands-on Haley

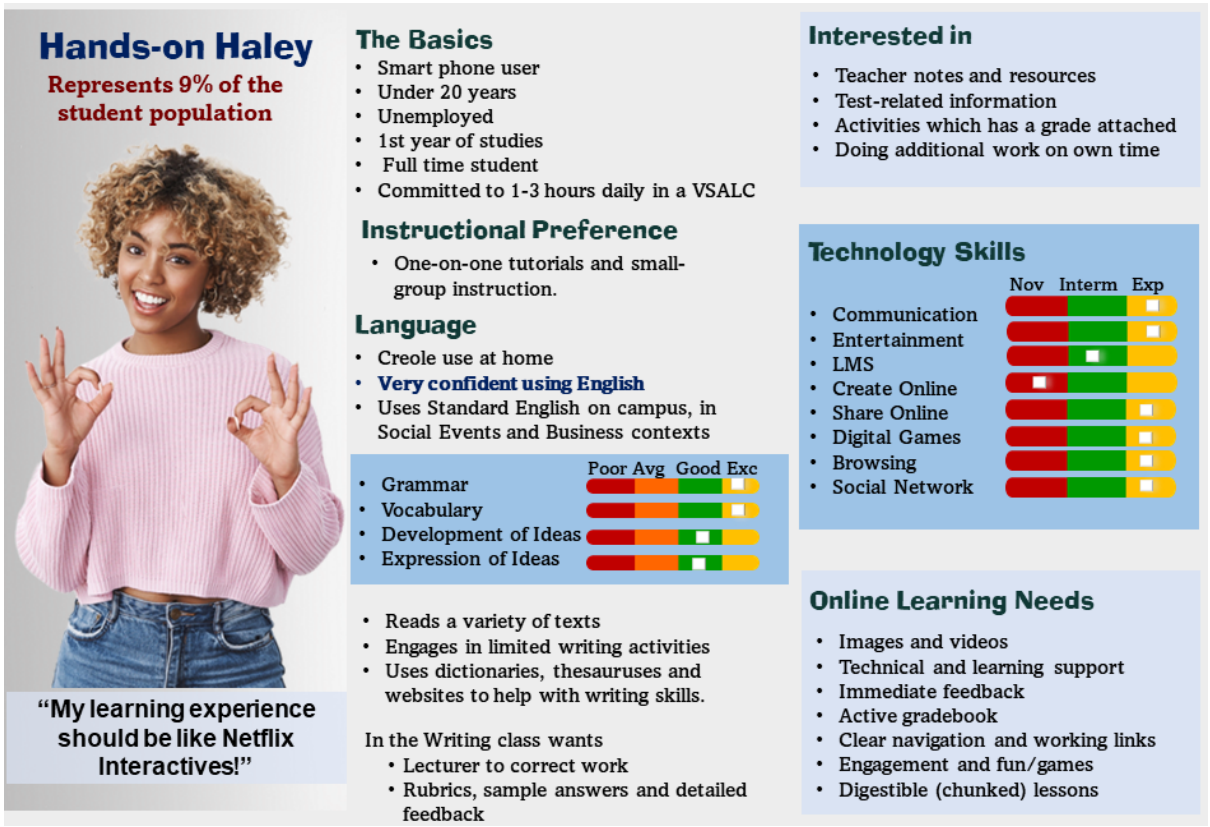
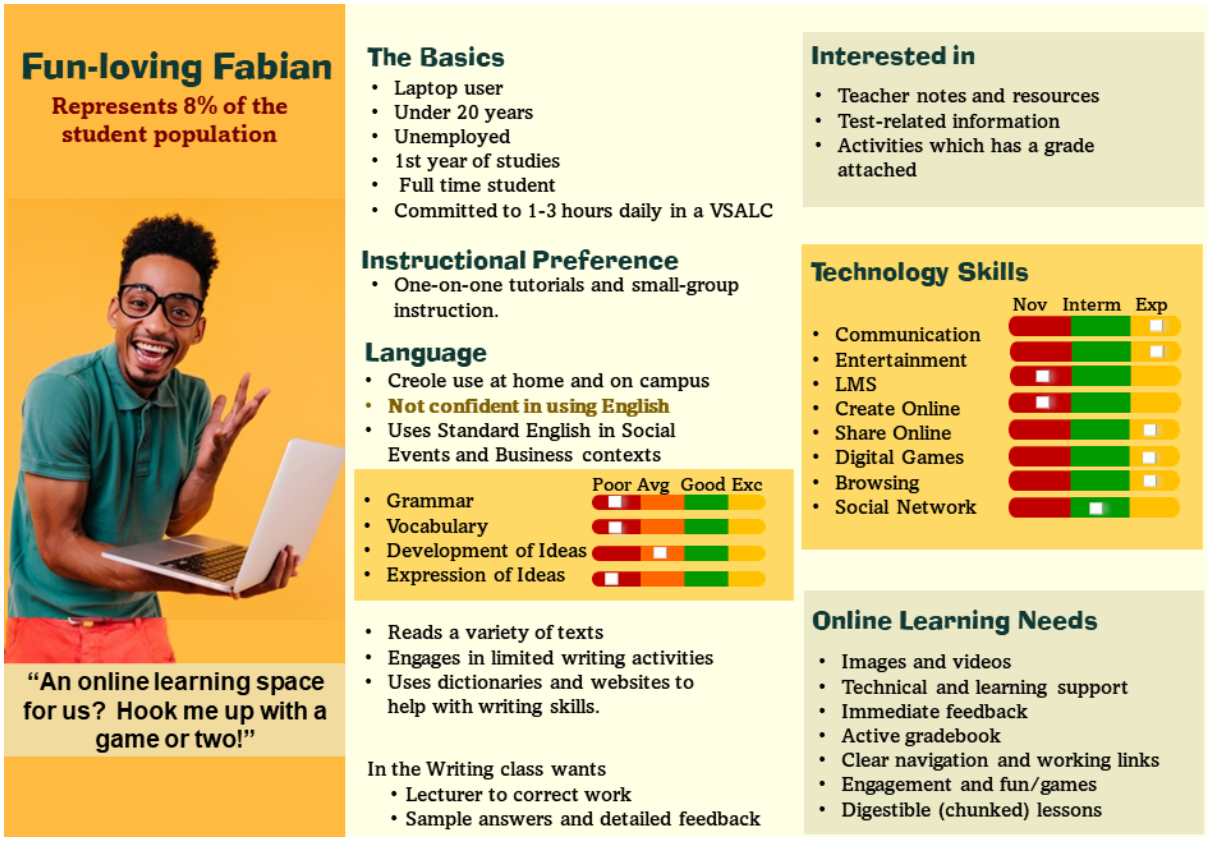


Figure 23

Persona: Fun-loving Fabian

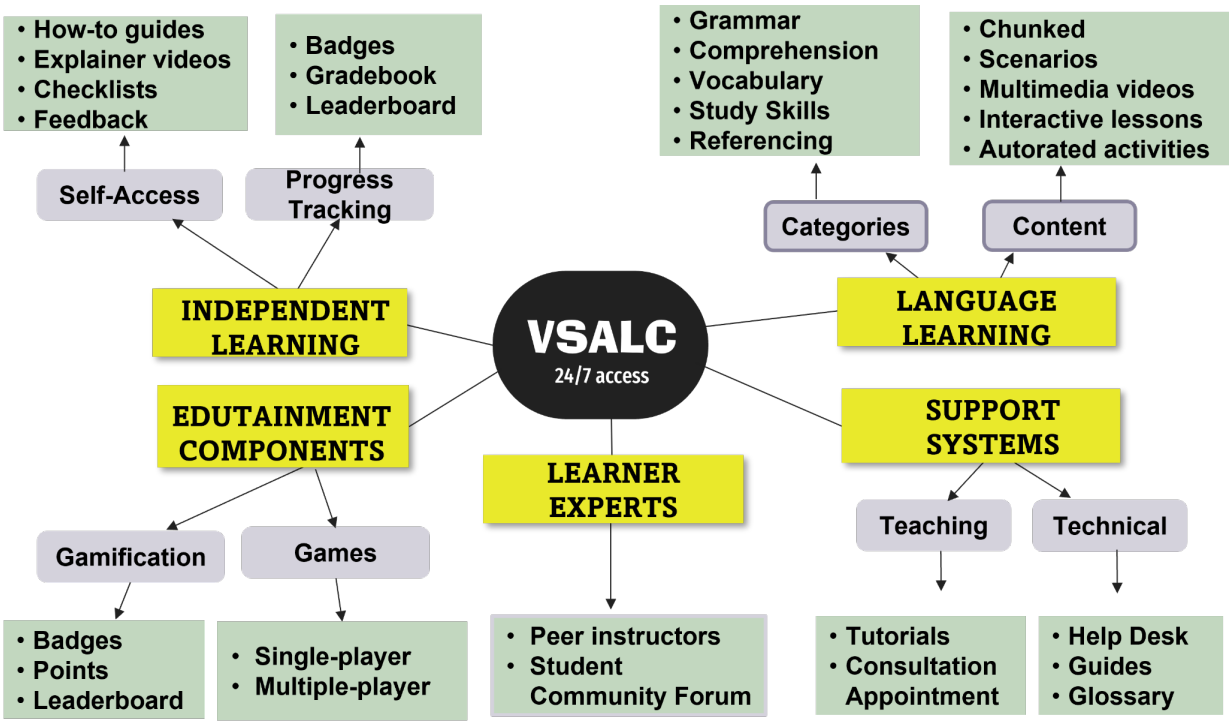


Implications for VSALC

How do we create a centre that caters to all three of our student personas? Importantly, there are more similarities than differences among Sonya, Haley, and Fabian. Based on age alone, they all belong to the Digital native/NetGen/Millennial generation, suggesting that they are multitaskers, who demand immediate feedback, and crave rewards and accolades (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Prensky, 2001; Tapscott, 1997). There is also an assumption that they have a command of a variety of technological tools. However, in keeping with the findings of some scholars, (Gallardo-Echenique et al., 2015; Hargittai, 2010; Stewart-McKoy, 2014) in our context, this is only true for some students and some technologies. Based on the three personas that we created, we propose the following (see Figure 24) as key elements of the virtual centre.

Figure 24

Elements of the VSALC



The personas hardly use technologies for learning purposes; therefore, there has to be some amount of scaffolding embedded in the features of the virtual centre to ensure ease of use. The chosen platform for the centre is Moodle, the Learning Management System (LMS) used by the University, and since Sonya, Haley and Fabian reported poor to good skills in using VLEs, the centre would include 'How-to' guides and explainer videos, as well as learner-controlled user navigation. With the use of learner-controlled navigation, the VSALC encourages autonomous learning, a key feature of self-access learning, as students would be in control of when, where, what, and how they study (Rubesch & Barrs, 2014). Independent, student-centred learning would also be promoted through the incorporation of progress tracking tools such as badges, a leader board, and the gradebook. Research suggests that when students track their own progress, it fosters student agency and makes them more invested in the learning process, resulting in higher achievements (Marzano, 2009; Robb, 2016). The use of the features that facilitate independent learning would benefit Haley, and would be a means of encouraging Fabian and Sonya to be less dependent on facilitators.

Irrespective of the personas' preferred instructional method, they consider graphics and videos as very important to a virtual self-access learning centre. Research suggests that

learners benefit in many ways from the inclusion of visuals in a lesson, and Clark and Mayer (2016) and Mayer (2021) propose that students in general, experience deeper learning when images are combined with words, and when words are placed near corresponding images. Therefore, we would include multimedia videos, interactive tutorials, images, animations, checklists and directionals, as well as text.

Because Sonya, Haley and Fabian all have busy academic schedules, that is, they are carrying between four and seven modules, the VSALC would leverage the chunking of content, a best practice in successful online modules (Clark & Mayer, 2016; Mayer, 2021). This would make the material more manageable, especially since there would be no lecturer present to guide students through the learning material. In addition to the chunking of the content, students would be guided by sample responses and rubrics, and receive immediate feedback through automated quizzes and activities. Furthermore, considering the differences among the connecting devices used by Sonya, Haley, and Fabian the VSALC would incorporate small, downloadable files which are compatible across devices and operating platforms.

Considering that the three student personas use the internet mainly for playing games and engaging in other entertainment activities, the VSALC would integrate an entertainment component using single and multiple player games to complement the gamification elements mentioned earlier. This, coupled with using non-classroom, real world contexts for the lessons, we hope, would reduce the academic feel of the space, thereby increasing its appeal. Features such as the badges and the competitiveness added through the leader board and games, for example, would help in motivating Sonya, Haley, and Fabian. Boudadi and Gutiérrez-Colón (2020), in their review of papers that study the effects of gamified learning environments on students' motivation and learning within a Second Language Acquisition (SLA) context, report that most of the studies show positive results on the learning, motivation and attitudes of university students. In a similar vein, Çakmak (2020) notes that Instagram is particularly popular among young people aged 18 to 29 years, and that it promotes reading and writing skills, expands vocabulary, encourages peer instruction and interaction, is visually aesthetic and engaging and is a means of developing and maintaining a community of practice. For these reasons, the incorporation of Instagram as a part of the VSALC suite would be beneficial.

To provide a satisfying learning experience, make it relatively easy to navigate the system, and not overwhelm students, the landing page of the VSALC would be organised into nine "rooms" (See Figure 25). With the aim of helping students improve their use of the

English language, the VSALC would provide content and activities on areas that students struggle with the most. The areas would be located within three of the nine rooms - The Structure of English, Words and their Meanings and Use of Academic English. Students would access the associated lessons and activities by clicking the hyperlinked rooms.

Figure 25

Landing page of the VSALC

In order to improve Sonya's and Fabian's, and reinforce Haley's confidence in using the English Language, the centre would incorporate the use of avatars as peer instructors/language coaches. We believe that the use of peer instructors would remove the power imbalance that tends to exist between teacher and students (teacher knows best, and teacher is the wielder of all knowledge syndrome). Research on peer instruction suggests that within a language learning setting, students are likely to be more open and react better to other students, as they are seen as more relatable and a representation of achievable success (Karim & Mohammed, 2018; Miquel & Duran, 2017).

As a means of extending and reinforcing the concept of Communities of Practice (CoPs), the inclusion of a student community forum in the VSALC would encourage discussion among each other, and the sharing of expertise and experiences akin to a general CoP. Added to this, to prevent students from going cold turkey on their teacher dependence, we would incorporate an appointment block where they could book one-on-one consultations with the Language specialist[s] of the physical SALC.

We take into consideration the linguistic background of Sonya, Haley, and Fabian in preparing the lessons. Being that students are native speakers of Jamaican Creole and second language learners of English, the VSALC's video tutorials, interactive lessons and activities would reflect both languages. The different scenarios used in the lessons would reflect real-life situations within a Jamaican/Caribbean context. Audio recordings done by voice-over artists, who are current and past university students, and who share similar accents and backgrounds to those of the student personas would also facilitate our English language learners who are predominantly Jamaican Creole speakers.

Conclusion

They spoke and we listened. Students at the University of Technology, Jamaica via a survey told us about themselves and what they desire in a virtual self-access learning centre. Using this information, we have presented a detailed profile of the typical student, as well as three student personas which we believe capture the nuances of the different learners.

This virtual centre, which is necessitated by the constraints of the physical SALC, responds to the language needs and technological expectations of the students. The key features of the VSALC, which include avatars as peer instructors, contexualised, interactive tutorials, progress tracking tools, gamification mechanics and access to Language Specialists in the physical SALC, provide an appealing space that encourages independent learning. We are in the process of creating the resources and populating the LMS, after which the VSALC will undergo a series of evaluation (usability and pilot testing) before its launch.

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