

English as a Medium of Instruction in Distance Education-1

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The Commonwealth of Learning (COL), Vancouver, in collaboration with the Overseas Development Administration (ODA) and the British Council, UK, commissioned Leeds University, UK and the Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi, India to look into the "Language needs of Commonwealth students studying at a distance through the medium of English". The findings that emerged from the case-studies of 11 countries took the shape of a comprehensive Report which was submitted to COL towards the end of 1990.

We think the Report should be of great interest to all engaged in Distance Education, particularly to those working in Commonwealth Countries. As it is not possible to present the entire report at one go, we sought permission to publish portions thereof in this Journal. Here, we present the Case Study of India, and seek reactions from our readers. These reactions will help us decide about further presentations from the Report.

We express our gratitude to the Commonwealth of Learning, Vancouver, for permitting us to publish this Case Study in IJOL.

1. INTRODUCTION

By and large in India English continues to be used as the medium of instruction at the level of higher education in general and for education in medicine, engineering and technology in particular. Of all the Commonwealth Countries such a use of English has a strong base and a long tradition particularly in India. This role of English has been questioned in recent years, and the introduction of distance education with its emphasis on egalitarianism in education has brought this question to the fore. In this article an attempt has been made to understand the issues involved.

2. RELEVANT ASPECT OF ELT BACKGROUND

Starting with West (1926)¹ who saw his Bengali learner of English as a bilingual in the making, to a Central Institute of Hindi publication *Indian Bilingualism* (1977)² – (more than 50 years after West's *Bilingualism* was published) – the Indian linguistic scene is described mainly in terms of bilingualism. But the term seems misleading in the context of education in India. In pursuance of the three language formula, three languages are generally taught compulsorily in schools (with the exception of the States of Tamil Nadu and Mizoram, where only two languages are taught compulsorily). Of the "1652 mother-tongues spoken in India as reported in the census of India (1961) there are only sixty seven languages which are actually taught in Indian schools..."³ This means that out of 1652 mother-tongues, the speakers of various 1585 mother-tongues have to become bilinguals (whatever the degree of attainment). And if

we consider the more important 15 languages, then, the number of such mother-tongues as force their speakers to become bilinguals goes up to 1637.

Of the 59 languages which are taught as compulsory first languages there are just 15 which may be termed majority or major first languages. Of these

"Hindi, Urdu and English ... are studied in twenty-one, twenty and nineteen states and union territories respectively. Bengali, Gujarati, Tamil, Telugu and Punjabi are studied in twelve, twelve, eleven, eleven and ten states and union territories respectively, and Malayalam, Marathi, Kannada, Sindhi, Assamese, Oriya and Manipuri in ... nine, nine, five, five, four, four and one state and union territories respectively. It is also interesting to note that it is only Hindi which is the majority first language in six big states and three union territories, while all other languages with the exception of English, Sindhi, and Urdu, are the majority first languages in only one of the states and union territories...."⁴

Of the twenty three languages studied as compulsory second languages,

"there are only three languages (... Hindi, ... English and ...Sanskrit) which are studied by the majority of the students in all the states and union territories Out of these three major second languages, it is English which tops the list, as it is the second language in fifteen states and five union territories ... Hindi is studied as a major second language in four states and five union territories, while Sanskrit is studied in two states and one union territory".⁵

Of the twenty four languages studied as compulsory third languages,

"it is generally Hindi, which is studied as the main compulsory third language ... (It) is being studied in twelve states and four union territories. In most of the non-Hindi speaking states and union territories it is Hindi which is prescribed to be studied as a third language by all non-Hindi speaking students, Generally speaking English and Sanskrit are studied as main third languages particularly in Hindi speaking states or in states where Hindi is studied as a main second language. Therefore, Hindi, English and Sanskrit may be considered as the main compulsory third languages"⁶

The foregoing facts show why India, besides being a "Linguistic area", is also said to be a nation of bilinguals and trilinguals. But, as indicated earlier, we prefer the term 'multilingual' with reference to those people who complete their high school education. Such a high proportion of language teaching and learning in the school programme does not warrant overlooking the linguistic foundations of curriculum. Consequent upon which

"in (the) Indian educational system also, particularly at (the) school stage, the general devaluation of language instruction is evident in the form of no or little rational planning and execution of the same".⁷

The above profile of English Language Teaching (ELT for short) in India will not be complete unless it is accompanied by a brief note on the medium of instruction in India. Broadly, there are three types of school looking after the first ten years of schooling in India as far as the medium of instruction is concerned.

- i) Privately run high profile schools, usually known as Public Schools, invariably use English as the medium of instruction, i.e., all the subjects are taught in English, in many cases right from class 1 onwards. Most schools run by the Christian Missions in India follow the same practice. Students from these schools go to higher levels of education with quite a high level of language competence in English, but are usually weak in their regional languages.
- ii) Quite a number of schools run by the Government of India, known as Central Schools, use English as the medium of instruction for Sciences and Hindi for Social Sciences all over the country. Students from these schools develop a reasonably high level of proficiency in both English and Hindi.
- iii) Majority of schools use the regional languages as the medium of instruction at the school level. The students from these schools remain weak in English, but achieve a reasonable level of proficiency in the regional language.

At the intermediate level, i.e., the two years of higher secondary level of education, the pattern conforms to types (i) and (iii) of schooling listed above. In other

words, higher secondary courses are available through the English medium at some institutions, at others they are available in regional languages. And this pattern is available at the undergraduate as well as the post-graduate level.

The ELT scene described above leads to a tripartite classification of the student population that may join higher education courses:

- i) students whose competence in English is of a very high standard,
- ii) students whose competence in English is not satisfactory, and
- iii) those whose English is very poor.

Besides, the situation worsens day by day as

- proportionately the number of well qualified teachers goes on falling,
- examination oriented teaching does not help in gaining language competence,
- large classes, limited reading materials and low motivation leave much to be desired.

The Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, Hyderabad, a number of English Language Teaching Institutes and Regional Institutes of English are engaged in improving the standards of ELT in the country, but these efforts do not seem to match the size of the problem.

Of course, the above classification is rather simplistic, as we have not talked about the disparities between the educational standards obtaining in rural against urban settings, high income groups against low and very low income groups etc., but, in general, such a classification presents a fairly representative picture of the scene.

3. DISTANCE EDUCATION SITUATION

Types of institution

India presents a very broad spectrum of institution-types that impart education through the distance mode. In the main, however, we may talk about two types:

- I) those institutions which cater to school education, and
- II) those which cater to higher education.

Institutions catering to school education are of two types:

- i) The National Open School (only one of its type), established in 1989 with jurisdiction over the whole country.
- ii) A few State Open Schools which cater to their respective States mainly.

At the tertiary level, there are four types of institution in India.

- i) Non-government agencies/institutions which use

distance mode of education commercially.

- ii) Directorates/Departments/Schools of Correspondence/ Distance Education functioning as components/wings of conventional universities/institutes (about 40 in number today).
- iii) State Open Universities (4 in number today) which are wholly committed to distance education.
- iv) The Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi, which is partly an open university and partly an agency commissioned not only to promote and develop distance education, but also determine its standards in the whole of India.

Types of course

The variety of courses given through distance education is quite large. At the school level there are courses in Social Sciences, Humanities, Commerce, Sciences and Mathematics, and at the tertiary level again courses in Social Sciences, Humanities, Commerce, Sciences, Mathematics, Education, and Health Sciences are available in most parts of the country; though the distribution of such institutions in the different regions of the country is not uniform. Besides, these conventional, discipline based courses some universities/institutes have introduced professional courses such as Teacher-Training, Management, Library and Information Science, Rural Development, Health Sciences and in a few areas in Engineering and Technology. More and more innovative courses are being worked on to be launched in the near future. These courses, as has been indicated earlier, are available at all the levels of instruction in India – from the school level through intermediate and undergraduate to the postgraduate levels.

Level of technology

Most courses given by the Distance Education Units at the conventional universities depend entirely on printed materials, and not all of them are in the self-instructional formats. Many of these courses are supported by written assignments and a few contact programmes. The open universities, on the other hand, depend on multimedia packages making use of audio and video materials in addition to written assignments and a variety of contact and counselling sessions. Many of the professional courses provide for long and intensive contact programmes as well. Laboratory work, wherever necessary, is managed at the laboratories of conventional universities.

Access to media materials in India is still very low as far as the student is concerned, as most students cannot afford the necessary equipment to make use of audio and video materials. Therefore, most audio and video material is made available at study centres for students' use. The same problem is the main reason why TV broadcasting is still not a promising way of reaching students. Although more than 75% of population is said to be covered by TV transmission, most students cannot

afford monitors to receive such transmission. In this sense Radio is a better means of access in India, as more than 98% of the population is said to have been covered for radio broadcasts, and at the same time receiver sets are quite cheap and easily available. For these reasons, a few states have started using radio broadcasts to support their courses and students, and recently TV broadcasts too have been started to support courses being given at the university level.

On the other hand the telephone network, though well spread all over the country, is not efficient enough to be put to use for educational purposes. Similarly, computers are being used in India, and computer education is being made available at some well-to-do schools, but it will take India quite sometime to bring in computer assisted learning systems.

To sum up, in the Indian situation, the availability of technology does not appear to be a problem, as it is available in good measure in terms of both know-how and manpower; what is problematic is the size of requirement.

The problem is not that of the substantive availability of technology, but that of being able to afford it for the kind of formidable demand that is there round the corner.

Access to wider reading materials

There is a wide variety of reading materials available in India, but the size of demand on the one hand and students' lack of purchasing power on the other make this variety ineffective. Mostly, such materials are available in larger towns, with their availability and variety thinning out as one moves into the interior or remote areas of the country – for example, in the difficult hilly terrain of the North-east even the daily newspaper becomes a rare commodity, let alone reading materials which are any way in low demand in such areas.

As far as the DE materials are concerned, it is only with the advent of open universities that regional and study centre based libraries have been introduced. There are plans to provide open university library corners in public libraries and at community centres. When implemented, this plan should increase the level of access to quality materials. But, the situation is not likely to improve as the pressure on higher education is expected to increase considerably in the near future.

With the all out effort to increase enrolments for higher education, the need for reading materials is going to increase substantially. Such rise in the demand may reduce the level of access to such materials as the supply may not match the demand.

Mode of assessment

Assessment in DE programmes is generally of three types – open university type, directorate type and other types.

All the open universities follow the system of continuous evaluation through written assignments and term-

end evaluation through three-hour written examinations. In certain cases there may also be tests in between in the form of projects, case studies and practical work. Students are expected to score passing grades at both the continuous and the term-end evaluation.

Directorates, being components of universities, follow the examination schemes of the university they belong to. Accordingly, in certain cases scores for the written assignments become a part of the overall evaluation, but in most cases it is only the term-end three hour written examination which decides the final result. In most directorates, the syllabi followed are the same as followed by the university concerned, and accordingly the examinations given to DE students are the same as faced by the face-to-face students of that university. Recording of awards also follows the pattern used at the university concerned.

Non-government DE institutions have their own schemes of evaluation. They may or may not use assignments for final scores, but the term-end examination is the most standard means of evaluation. Parts of the overall evaluation may be taken care of by projects and/or field assignments.

Most directorates and open universities provide for two examinations a year – the main and the supplementary one. In case a university follows the semester system, or for a course that is given according to the semester system there will be two main examinations and usually an equal number of supplementary examinations every year. The Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi, however, provides a yearly cycle of two term-end examinations given in June and December every year without any provision for supplementary examinations.

Methods of dealing with L2^s (English) problems within DE

Earlier in this case, we⁶ identified three student-types. The third type who are very poor in English will in all probability take the courses through the regional medium; and those whose English is quite good will not have any substantial problems with the medium of instruction – English. What remains is the second type whose language competence is questionable, and it is this group that is the subject of our discussion. At the same time we need to note that in certain cases a desired course may not be available in one's regional language, in which case one has to depend on the English version. And the very base of student population being large, those who take DE courses through English, even though their competence in it is questionable, constitute a very large student population.

Simplification: The most widely used method of solving L2 (i.e., English) problems is to present study materials in "simple" English. Usually the notion of "simple" is associated with the use of commonly used lexis, shorter

sentences, explanations and illustrations.

In the first place, most of the study material produced at the conventional university based directorates of DE do not pay any serious attention to the problems of language faced by students. Secondly, wherever attempts are made to simplify the language of study materials (recently established open universities make attempts to do so), such simplification is based on the writers' experience with and understanding of learners' needs, which experience and understanding is supposed to get translated intuitively into the required simplification. That such a thing does not happen is evidenced by the fact that the student complaints against the difficulty level of the language are of worrying proportions. Thirdly, simplification beyond a point is not possible. In learning a discipline, one also needs to learn the language of that discipline. And if the process of simplification deprives the study material of the language characteristic of the discipline in question, the simplification may do more harm than good. To strike the right balance between the language needed and the level and nature of simplification is obviously a task that must be difficult for most academics to perform.

Glossaries: Most materials produced by open universities and many by the directorates do provide glossaries along with the study materials. These glossaries do function as instant language aids, but nothing more than that. However, it is not unusual to find glossaries falling short of what they should be in more than one sense – a noun may be glossed as an adjective or a meaning not relevant to the context may be given.

Face-to-face component: Face-to-face teaching/tutoring is available in most open university courses and to some extent in those offered by the directorates. These contacts are not overtly meant to resolve L2 difficulties, instead most of the contact time is spent in explaining difficult concepts, providing illustrations etc. But, in a sense the help available must cover areas which prove to be difficult because of the language used in the study material. The issue of language apart, the Indian experience is that most of the contact sessions get materialized as lecture sessions – this gives both the teacher and the learners a feeling of their having done the job. In general such contacts are not supposed to address themselves to issues of language specifically, but in reality most of these contacts are necessitated by language problems.

Compulsory parallel communication skills courses: As there are relatively elaborate language teaching schemes available at all levels on way to the tertiary level of education in India, generally there are no parallel communication skills courses made available to students to overcome the difficulties caused by using English as

the medium of instruction. However, most compulsory courses in English at the intermediate/higher secondary level or even at the first year of the degree programme are courses that focus on grammar, comprehension of texts, language skills and language functions, either all of them together or any combinations thereof. These courses are independent of each and every discipline, but are supposed to better prepare the student to handle the disciplines he/she studies. These may therefore be considered 'parallel language courses'.

At places such courses are like English for Special Purposes (ESP) courses, at others they are of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) type; then there are others known as 'Language through Literature Courses' – these courses make use of original writings of various types for teaching language items mostly identified on structural, situational and/or functional parameters.

Recently, some universities have introduced "Study Skills" component in these courses. These skills subsume activities like reading comprehension based on comprehension questions, note-taking and note-making, writing of short and long paragraphs, summarising, reference work of various types etc. In certain cases various techniques for improving reading speed may also be seen in use.

Study Skills: The notion of study skills subsumes reading and writing skills besides organisation of self-study and general reference skills. In general, language/communication skills do not constitute an integral component of the course-content, nor is there any evidence of promoting course specific study skills. There is no attempt at training the learner to progressively cope with the language he/she encounters in the study materials as he/she progresses through the course materials.

Texts

Generally, study materials are prepared by academics of varying degrees of experience in writing for DE. Consequent upon which most materials are hardly any different from chapters in textbooks. Very often the writers are unwilling partners in the enterprise of developing materials as, with the exception of IGNOU, institutions offer low remuneration to writers. The weakest feature of most materials is their poor presentation, coupled with the absence of learner activities and access devices and then inappropriate language.

Most materials from the Directorates of Distance Education remain closer to academic articles/essays which besides passing on information present the writers version of a discussion. In other words, the materials are subject/discipline driven and writer-structured.

However, the recently established open universities have introduced a somewhat different brand of study materials. These materials, though not with the same degree of success in each and every case, display standard DE study unit formats – beginning with objectives, a pedagogic introduction, the content, summaries, intext questions etc. However, usually these units betray

a ritualistic adherence to formats without really succeeding in involving the learner in the required learning process. It is so partly because the variety of learning tasks/exercises is limited, and partly because they are not motivating.

Pre-reading tasks, be they in the materials prepared by Directorates of DE or by open universities, are of study-guide type, very often no different from general instructions, and at best bad-questions.

In-reading tasks are noticeable in only some materials produced at open universities. These are usually short-answer questions supposed to help the learners revise the content, check their progress, drill a learning item and remain on the right track.

Post-reading tasks constitute a standard feature of study units produced at the Directorates of DE. Some of the units produced at open universities also use this device. They may serve as specimen questions to help learners prepare themselves for the final examination, work for overall comprehension or reinforce learning.

Instructional design

The materials prepared at the Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi are by far the best in terms of instructional design and getup. They are learner-active and full of access devices, which are the result of well-organised course development mechanisms supported by subject experts, language experts, editors and instructional designers. Course units produced at other open universities, namely Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University, Hyderabad, Kota Open University, Rajasthan and Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University, Nashik are close matches with the latter two showing better design than the former. Materials produced at the National Open School also are reasonably advanced in terms of instructional design; however, their presentation, especially "printing" needs a lot of improvement.

On the contrary, materials produced at the Directorates of Distance Education are mostly like prescribed texts used at conventional universities.

Written assignments

Invariably all the materials/courses set written assignments. At open universities they serve for formative as well as summative assessment, but in the case of Directorates of Distance Education their main purpose is to provide two way communication. One of the main underlying assumptions pertaining to assignments, though entirely unfounded, is that students can/do write in English without any difficulty. Accordingly, students are left to themselves to work on them. In most cases, the tutors fail to see assignment-responses as means of two-way didactic communication, instead they treat them as answer-scripts to be assessed in terms of grades and marks. Usually, there are no general marking schemes provided, as such standards of assessment vary greatly.

4. PERCEIVED NEEDS

Perceived general needs

In general all the institutions feel that they need training for

- course/unit writers in self-instructional writing methodologies
- subject specialists in preparing interactive DE materials
- those who take DE as their chosen vocation
- editors with special reference to the preparation of DE materials
- those who look after the "language" of the DE materials – English for Distance Education Purposes (EDEP) specialists
- those who are engaged in the management of DE
- updating, adapting and translating DE materials.

Besides these *training-needs*, there are other general needs:

- flexible writing methodologies to cater to different types of learners
- research about how to improve one's *reading* and *writing* skills
- a national DE forum for purposeful exchanges – conferences, workshops etc.
- a national DE network to link DE institutions and thus save resources
- more and diverse international exposure to various aspects of DE through exchange of experts, materials, and research findings, consultancies and collaborative work
- improvements in multimedia packages
- move away from restricted to committed and open DE
- equipment such as OHPs, audio and video studios, computers, fax machines, etc.
- improvement in printing facilities/systems – move toward desktop publishing etc.

Perceived English Language Teaching (ELT) needs

The general scenario is that those DE students who

use English as the medium of instruction do suffer difficulties on account of their low competence in English. At the same time no one seems to know what the solution is – it appears that the best way is to learn both the subject and the relevant level of language simultaneously.

First, it is clear that in spite of glossaries and other means of making the language of the materials accessible, the need for face-to-face interaction invariably seems to stem from language difficulties. Secondly, the broad spectrum of the language competencies of learners makes the study materials look insensitive to language issues; these materials are not flexible enough to cater to either the differing levels of language competence or the differing learning styles. Thirdly, the pressure, under which DE materials are produced in the developing countries, does not allow enough time and effort for preparing more flexible materials for that is seen as a luxury which these countries can ill afford. Accordingly, it appears that the major needs in this area are as follows:

- training courses given to subject/content-specialists for preparing DE materials should include a strong component for raising their awareness of L2 issues and their solutions
- a similar component should be made available in the training of language editors, who should be ELT experts preferably
- content-specialists and ELT specialists need to work together to prepare the materials
- as "simplification" occurs only superficially and glossaries serve but a limited purpose, a variety of L2 support techniques should be used
- study skills, in whatever form they are introduced, should be content specific
- English-across-the-curriculum approach needs to be adopted in course preparation, as it appears to be the best way of overcoming the language difficulties of diverse student populations
- emphasis should be given to developing **reading** and **writing** skills in all DE materials
- courses in communication skills should be made available as ELT support.

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2. Sharma, P.G. and Suresh Kumar (Eds) 1977 "Indian Bilingualism" in *Indian Bilingualism*, Central Institute of Hindi, Agra.
3. Chaturvedi, M.G. and Mohale, B.V. 1977 *The Position of Languages in School Curriculum in India*, National Council of Educational Research and Training, New Delhi. p. 49.
4. Ibid. p. 60
5. Ibid. p. 62
6. Ibid. p. 64
7. Ibid. p. 7
8. As discussed in the earlier parts of this Study, English is the most common pan-Indian medium of instruction in higher education. Besides, it is the most common second language studied in India, in which sense it is denoted by the symbol L2.