

English as a Medium of Instruction in Distance Education-3

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This article is the third in the series entitled "English as a Medium of Instruction in Distance Education". Earlier we presented four case studies — India, Mauritius, Nigeria and Zimbabwe — in order to give our readers a clear idea of the kind of data that was collected from eleven countries. We appreciate the interest which the readers have shown in these studies and have noted the suggestion that we present all the cases through IJOL, which we may do at a later point of time. At present, however, we must go according to our plan and present the generalised findings based on all the cases and also the conclusions drawn from these findings.

We express our gratitude to the Commonwealth of Learning for having permitted us to publish the portions of the study in IJOL.

1. CASE STUDY FINDINGS

1.1 Learners

The Commonwealth Countries present a vast spectrum of learner types. At one end of this spectrum are those who are just entering the domain of literacy, mostly through their native languages, at the other end are those who come from families with strong traditions of education. The latter, mostly competent multilinguals, display a very high level of competence in English. For obvious reasons neither of these types are the subjects of this study.

The remaining learner population, a large majority that falls between these extremes, constitutes the clientele of DE in the Commonwealth. These learners may generally be characterised as follows:

- * They are educationally heterogeneous, both in terms of academic abilities and motivation.
- * They belong to the culture of teacher-centred education, with very little experience of academic interaction as a means of learning and none at all of self-learning.
- * They have mostly low English language competence, as they come through a teacher-centred ELT system in which (i) language skills are taught in isolation from one another and (ii) language as a 'product' rather than a 'process' gets emphasised all along the process of teaching and learning.
- * Their learning styles differ vastly from country to country, but a common feature is the stress on rote learning — surface rather than deep learning. The learners are not trained for deep or self-learning at all.
- * Mostly these learners are unpractised readers, as access to reading materials is limited, adequate and appropriate reading materials are not available easily and habits of leisure reading as well as indigenous reading materials are non-existent. The home background, as far as reading is concerned, is no better.

- * Worse than **reading** is the case of **writing**, as mostly writing is limited to examination situations. In other situations any writing done in English is guided and mechanical, seldom reaching the level of reflective writing with appropriate attention to discourse features suitable to the context.

1.2 Learning Medium

Learning medium too presents a vast variety. The general features, however, are as follows:

- * Print remains the most dominant medium all over and there are places where print alone is the medium of learning/teaching.
- * The combinations in use are : print and audio, print, audio and video mainly.
- * Use of broadcasts (Radio & TV) is limited in general, but attempts are being made to increase the proportion of such support — the bottle-necks are those of funds and technology.
- * Telephone and computers are yet to become tools of learning media in most of these countries.
- * Peer contact is limited and not of much educational consequence.

[The above description, of course, does not apply to countries like the U.K. Canada etc. but to most developing Commonwealth Countries.]

1.3 Levels of technology

Leaving the developed Commonwealth Countries aside, the general scene is as follows:

- * Levels of technology, though at varying stages, are generally low. Computer and Satellite technologies are not available in most places. Audio, video, radio and television, though available, are not feasible technologies for large scale use. But, the future prospects are bright

as each country is striving for bringing in more and more media into its educational operations — Malaysia is a good indicator of this trend.

- * Generally, neither the educator nor the learner is aware of the potential of the modern media for purposes of education, especially mass education, and cultural biases stand in the way of moving fast toward media-utilization.
- * Where people do use additional media, they are usually unaware of how to use them effectively — usually they fail to integrate media components into a purposeful and effective whole.
- * As far as printing is concerned, feeble beginnings are being made to move toward desk-top publishing. It will take quite sometime before it becomes a norm.
- * Technologies for communication in general and for education in particular are in the process of being transferred to developing countries. The process is slow because of financial and manpower constraints.

1.4 ELT situation

In general, the standard of studies in English is falling in all the Commonwealth Countries where it is not a native language. Independence, rise of nationalism and with that an urge to promote and use native languages have been a major cause for such a state of affairs. Secondly, the phenomenal rise in learner numbers has put unmanageable pressure on the schooling systems all over. The general scene is as follows:

- * Expatriate teachers of English have disappeared from the scene generally.
- * Native teachers in most cases are untrained and inadequately qualified for teaching English at the formative stages of learners at school.
- * ELT competence of each country displays a vast range — there are institutions which have trained and well qualified teachers, appropriate equipment, a reasonable learning environment, and then others which lack even the most primitive language teaching facilities. Accordingly, different institution types produce learners with different types of language competence.
- * Usually, the language (L2) problems pertain to vocabulary, syntax, discourse, language skills, and cultural aspects of language in terms of both use and usage. In other words all aspects of L2 pose problems of varying degrees of complexity.
- * State policies of language have reduced the stability of ELT in most countries, resulting in a downplay of the need for systematic instruction in English. This has affected adversely the learners' motivation for learning English.
- * English in certain cases is introduced late in the school curricula, in others there is hardly any pre- or post-school exposure to English available now. It remains a school subject nevertheless in most cases. Where it is said to be used as a medium of instruction, it is actually so only in name, as it is the native language which supports most of educational interaction in such cases.

- * Most L2 teaching does not go beyond vocabulary and syntax, i.e., the surface level of language.
- * In most countries, teaching materials are not available easily.

1.5 Instructional Design

Instructional design as depicted by most study materials leaves much to be desired. Generally, this design does not go beyond the application of a few rules of thumb at the level of techniques rather than exploiting some of the sound theories and applications of instructional design. There are exceptions to this generalization, but by and large it stands.

This generalization is evidenced by the rigid and counterproductive adherence to standardized unit formats, which do not allow flexible approaches to learning. This observation is of significance as no two learners learn the same way. Usually, these formats are characterised by a statement of objectives followed by reading material with comprehension questions here and there and a few tasks to close the unit. And it is not unusual to come across such instructions in them as are ambiguous, complicated and even confusing. Similarly, written study aids in the form of summaries etc., organizational aids such as subtitles, typography etc., or graphic aids are not always well planned, appropriate and adequate.

1.6 Study Materials/Texts

It is evident that attempts are being made to prepare learner oriented study materials, but they need improvements of various types to be really useful for self-study. In general the following weaknesses characterise most of the materials studied.

- i) Materials and the tasks therein do not emphasize purposeful reading. Usually, the materials consist of dense tracts of text which are not built within a clear framework of activities. Thus, generally materials fail to build a desired level of motivation among the students.
- ii) Essentially, the study materials are subject driven and subject structured. For purposes of self-study it is better that they are learning-structured.
- iii) In general, there is no attempt to draw upon the background knowledge of learners in terms of both the formal rhetorical organisation of texts and the knowledge related to the content/theme of texts.
- iv) Generally, study materials function as tools of transferring information from the institution/teachers to the learners.

As such, the orientation of most materials is **non-pedagogic**, which is evidenced by the following facts:

- * very few learner activities — very rarely would one come across pre-text, post-text and in-text activities all in one unit,
- * if there are any learner activities presented, they are not engaging, they fail to motivate the learner,
- * many of them, if there are any, are not purposeful pedagogically, and
- * wherever one finds them, they are not sequenced properly, as very often they are presented unsystematically.

1.7 ELT Support in Study Materials

The DE materials are either (i) insensitive to the English language needs of the learners, or (ii) they attend to them in limited, inappropriate and ad hoc ways.

- i) Insensitiveness to these needs is born of the wrong assumptions made by institutions and course writers that their students have high or the required competence in English language, the medium of instruction.
- ii) The ELT support provided in and through the materials is an indicator of a certain degree of sensitiveness towards the needs mentioned above. But the techniques used to provide this support are inadequate and, in certain cases, suspect. Here we make a mention of them, briefly though.
 - a) Glossary: It is an in-text device that provides meanings of technical and difficult/unfamiliar words and expressions used in the text. In most cases, the glosses presented are weak. For example, at times the meanings provided do not suit the context as they mix up, 'use' and 'usage' carelessly and at times a nominal phrase is paraphrased as an adjectival one. Besides, in most cases the choice of words for glosses does not indicate any principles of selection being followed. Then the placement of glossaries raises a few questions which have not been answered in the texts — why in the beginning, why at the end etc?
 - b) Simplification: Generally, simplification pertains to words and syntax, i.e., the surface features of the medium of instruction. In certain cases "readability formulae" have been used as norms for simplifying texts.

Such simplification is usually guided by the structural view of language, as such, to the exclusion of discourse level difficulties of language use, it remains confined to lexis and surface structures mainly.

- iii) Comprehension questions are provided within the text materials to help the students comprehend the materials/themes. However, these questions are usually usage directed and do not encourage deep study, reflective and creative reading or writing.
- iv) Parallel communication skills courses constitute yet another technique used to help students overcome their language (L2) difficulties. Most of these courses too are guided by the structural view of language which fails to emphasise the communicative aspects of language. Besides, some of these courses are usually based on isolated language skills, and in certain cases on language functions but they fail to promote integrated language skills among learners as both of these approaches are 'product' oriented. Consequently, students fail to master the processes involved in language skills, nor do they succeed in learning the language in functional terms. In other words these functions, skills, or structure-cum-lexis based courses do not serve the students sufficiently.

1.8 Study-skills

Most courses provide for study skills to promote self-study among the learners. However, the perception of 'study skills', as depicted in the study materials, is limited. The more visible features of the 'study skills' component in most materials are as follows:

- i) 'Study skills' as mere instructions: 'Study skills' are treated as if they are just a few rules of thumb, a few do's and don't's, which if followed promote learning. Generally, they are in the form of a few instructions to learners. These instructions are, at best, general study tips about organization of work, rationing of time, simple reference skills, general note-taking etc.
- ii) Having taken such a view of 'study skills', very often they are placed in the beginning of a course/unit. Such pre-course placement of 'study skills' leaves no room for integrating them with the study material. As such they function as pre-course 'orientation programmes' for self-study rather than any means of facilitating learning.
- iii) 'Study skills' component does not assume any responsibility for language development. For example, it does not contribute to learner's reading and writing skills. Nor does it facilitate learning through the medium of English.
- iv) In general, the approach followed is ad hoc and unsystematic — something like "learner training" approach, in which the concerns of language development and facilitating learning through L2 medium of instruction remain ignored or at best secondary.

1.9 Disjoint Relation Between ELT Support and its Context

Neither the ELT support (item 7 above) nor the 'study skills' support (item 8 above) is context based. In other words, whatever support is provided for promoting or developing learners L2 and study skills is context independent. As such, this support does not go together with the context to effect learning which it is supposed to do. In general, we may say that neither of these supports is

- i) content based or content driven.
- ii) integrated with each other contextually.

Consequently, they **do not enable** learners to

- i) acquire comprehensive and composition skills relevant to the content and context they are dealing with.
- ii) identify and develop a wider range of language skills to promote self-learning, and
- iii) develop strategies of learning through English, the medium of instruction.

1.10 Need for Face-to-face Sessions

The problems identified in items 1.7, 1.8 and 1.9 above lead to the following consequences:

- (i) DE materials end up being heavily mediated by tutors/counsellors on the one hand, and
- (ii) on the other, if such mediation is not available, the learner finds him/herself isolated and frustrated.

Increasing dependence on face-to-face sessions is mainly because of L2 problems. And yet, these sessions do not pay any attention specifically to such problems as L2 problems get confused with content problems.

1.11 Course Writers

Course writers fail to come to terms with the particular demands of Distance Education (DE) mainly in the areas of developing self-instructional materials. Some of the possible causes of this phenomenon appear to be as follows:

- i) Professional orientation: Their experience in writing (be it that of writing papers or other types of text) stems from the conventional face-to-face system of education.
- ii) Professional commitment: Their commitment lies in face-to-face teaching. Being sceptic of, indifferent and biased toward DE they do not rate DE highly. Consequently, transition to DE methodologies becomes difficult for them.
- iii) Institutional commitment: a) Part-time course writers have heavy commitments at their parent institutions. Partly because of this reason and partly because course writing in most cases is a lowly paid activity, their commitment to DE remains, at best, half-hearted. (b) Usually, such course writers work in isolation from one another as team work is not possible. Consequently, the courses become jumpy and poorly integrated.
- iv) Limited learner awareness: Usually, these course writers are not aware of the L2 needs of learners, nor are they aware of the learner oriented pedagogic methodologies. They remain subject/discipline driven, and ignore the issues pertaining to L2 as the medium of instruction. Very often, these writers assume full/reasonable L2 competence on the part of learners, and think that if they put forth the **content** they have done their job. Whether they have used the language that can facilitate learning is not seen as a matter of concern.
- v) Lack of training: Usually, these writers have no training in DE. In certain cases they are given orientation for purposes of preparing self-instructional materials, but the results of such orientations are not uniformly encouraging as it is limited to a few techniques which do not provide for a wide range of repertoire as most of them cling to a particular format and do not go beyond that.
- vi) There is hardly any case in which a subject-specialist and an ELT expert work together to shape materials. It is not unusual to come across non-specialist, ill paid course writers or those who take up such writing under one or the other type of compulsion.

1.12 Evaluation of DE Materials Non-existent

There is hardly any research in or evaluation of the teaching materials which are being used by the DE institutions. The major cause for this state of affairs is the absence of adequate institutional infrastructure required for such work. We elaborate this point as follows.

- i) Institutions have no research or evaluation capability, as such feedback about the efficacy of study materials is not

available. Consequently, no improvement in the effectiveness of study materials can be brought about currently.

- ii) Most institutions lack appropriate technologies which are required to update existing materials and/or adapt new materials from different sources. As a consequence, the shelf-life of courses has been undesirably long.
- iii) Generally, there is lack of sufficient background reading and/or supplementary materials at all the institutions. Consequently, both the staff and the students remain handicapped academically.

1.13 No Collaboration Among ELT and DE Institutions

No formal and professional links exist between local level DE and ELT institutions. It is so because of the following reasons.

- i) Traditionally, studies in different subjects and language(s) have been viewed as separate and independent activities. As such, institutions as well as individual academics are not aware of the need for formal and professional links of a kind mentioned above.
- ii) At some places, such links are not considered desirable because of the low status given to ELT institutions there.
- iii) Even if the need for such links is seen as desirable, there are no known and tested procedures to effect such links.
- iv) At some places there are no ELT institutions, as such the question of building desirable links between them and DE institution does not arise.

1.14 Evaluation

Student evaluation is generally effected through assignments and term-end examinations. The significant point to be made here is that very little emphasis is given to writing as a communicative process—learners are not given any guidance for preparing written assignments, assessors are not provided with marking schemes, and weaknesses in written communication are not given adequate importance for purposes of marking the scripts.

2. CONCLUSIONS

Research into the language and study skills needs of ESL students learning by means of English-medium print-based DE courses is a relatively new area and in the absence of an alternative name, we have used the term English for Distance Education Purposes (EDEP). Although EDEP draws on well-established research areas in the L1/L2/FL language field and DE—readability, process of writing, learner training, individualised and autonomous learning, for example—it will take time to establish its own particular emphases and dimensions. We would therefore wish this research project to be viewed as an initial contribution to this line of enquiry, the main purpose of which is to raise awareness of key concerns which, among others no doubt, should be considered for future research and development.

2.1 Language Learning Background

In the majority of the Commonwealth countries we have been dealing with, English officially becomes the medium of

instruction in mainly the upper primary, secondary and tertiary levels and therefore plays a crucial role as the medium of teaching and learning and in textual support across the educational curriculum. It is also the language of business, politics, broadcasting, the press and military and often the language of communication across the different main language groups.

However, the general picture that emerged was of an acknowledged overall decline in the standard of attainment in English at all levels of the educational system. The root of the problem seems to lie in the huge expansion of primary and secondary school systems at independence, when universal primary education was introduced. The problem is compounded by an unrealistic downplaying of English language needs, a diversity of mother tongue languages often resulting in an unstable use of English in schools, inadequate English language teaching standards, limited resources and fiercely competitive exam-oriented educational systems. In practice, this leads to the emergence of parallel systems, one formal and one informal;

... although the formal system maintains the appearance of an English-medium or part English-medium educational institution or structure, the informal system makes it possible for students with limited English to achieve educational success. This is achieved by various means — by the memorisation of English texts ... by covert use of the mother tongue and by distorting the formal system's examination process. Such students will not have achieved English language literacy in any active sense; in Widdowson's terms (Widdowson 1983) they will lack both **communicative competence and creative capacity**.

Swales, J (1986:11)

While there are several levels of proficiency in English, there is evidence that **generally** the learners have acquired a surface knowledge of the rules of syntax and sentence structures but have difficulty with performance, handling the communicative use of language, both oral and written. While the students may not be deficient in their numerate and technical skills, they lack the literacy skills to use language to solve problems or perform tasks required in their particular disciplines.

In general, therefore, learners entering into secondary and tertiary level distance education courses bring with them a **backlog** of language and study skills needs.

2.2 Distance Education Context

Broadly speaking, the majority of the DE materials we evaluated presented learners with formidable tracts of dense text which was essentially content-orientated and subject-structured. On the whole, there was little evidence of effective **learning-orientated** methodologies designed to promote or facilitate learning, and particularly for learning through a second or foreign language print medium, e.g. by increasing an ESL learners' **comprehension from text and abilities to comprehend** from text. This is not to say that

materials developers failed to appreciate the need for learning-orientated methodologies. Indeed, there were many examples of attempts in that direction. Our criticism is that there was little evidence of a move from this widely acknowledged need to the adoption of methodologies most **appropriate** for the activation of learning.

In terms of second language support, for example, the main strategies used were word and sentence simplification and parallel general English language teaching courses. Both these strategies were based on a structuralist account of language which places an emphasis on the formal features and patterns of language and the outcomes or **products** of instruction, i.e. the knowledge and skills to be gained by a learner. However, it does so to the exclusion of an emphasis on the creative **processes** through which knowledge and skills might be gained.

In addition, by treating language in such generalised terms, these types of strategies do not take into account the diversity of language across different subject areas and the differing ways in which it is used, for example, the conceptual structures and conventions associated with a particular disciplinary culture. As a consequence, they do not contribute towards developing learners' abilities to cope with the different demands that are made upon language within different courses.

The materials, in general, seemed to depend upon a high degree of motivation that a learner brought to bear upon them since they in themselves failed to engage learners in purposeful learning tasks or guide them towards a critical appraisal of ideas.

These are serious limitations in view of :

- * the sort of Commonwealth learners who undertake English-medium distance courses — in many cases emergency programmes — who tend to come from educationally deprived areas and are therefore precisely the sort of learners **most** in need of additional support to facilitate learning
- * the massive expansion of English medium DE courses for ESL/EFL learners
- * the promotion of increased exchange of DE materials

It therefore becomes important to consider the reasons for these limitations so that appropriate recommendations can be made.

The overriding impression that emerged from the DE institutions was that of a predominantly product-orientated perspective of education which places an emphasis on **what** it taught rather than **how** it is taught and, furthermore, treats learners as undifferentiated in terms of how they learn. It is a view that suggests all that is lacking in an impoverished or limited educational system is adequate means for 'depositing' education. For example, the vast majority of DE materials developers tended to regard DE as merely an **alternative** educational delivery system without fully appreciating the particular demands that a distance delivery system presents to ESL learners and which are crucially related to the effectiveness of DE courses.

For example, the DE courses we evaluated — predominantly print-based or print-led, award-bearing courses with a correspondence/assignment component — place a heavy emphasis on exactly the sort of skills which are underdeveloped in these types of learners and they do so without providing any additional learner support. Learners, who are in most cases **unpractised readers and writers** in both their own language L1 and in their second language L2 (assuming English is the second language), are presented with materials and tasks which require and assume a high level of English proficiency and a **wide** range of **existing** writing and reading skills in English. For example, a typical assignment load could ask an unpractised writer to complete a variety of different types of writing — essentially written tests — descriptive, argumentative, expressive, personal, summaries, critiques, research reports, technical reports, book reports **within a particular subject area**.

In general, the DE materials and induction courses did very little to support or prepare ESL learners for a **self-study** situation. Such learners need psychological and methodological preparation and practice in self-direction. This is **particularly** important for the broad type of ESL learners entering these DE courses who come from a traditional transmission mode style of education and who therefore bring to the situation their own expectations about learning, language learning, learning through a second/foreign language, their teacher's role (or in this case, the instructional 'voice' of DE materials) and their own roles. This sort of background predisposes the learners towards a passive relationship with the instructional 'voice', a dependence on mediation and towards strategies associated with poor learners and poor language learners. For example, most DE institutions regarded study skills as a set of universally applicable academic principles relating to notetaking, reading skills, work organisation, etc. This simplistic approach raises important questions — whether one can or should teach study skills as if there was an acceptable norm of study and as if learners possess inherent, invariant styles of learning across all subject areas or whether it is more effective to adopt a less prescriptive approach to study skills related to the needs that arise from a specific subject area, but which also takes account of differences in learning styles and language needs and aims to help learners consider their own learning attitudes and preferences, experiment with different learning strategies and take more responsibility for their own learning, i.e. **development in the area which has come to be known as learner training**. We support this latter view.

To a large degree, the lack of awareness of language and study-skills problems/needs stems from the traditional tendency to separate content and language teaching. This compartmentalising is reflected in the way DE materials writers and editors viewed their responsibilities as separate concerns. In effect, language becomes decontextualised and divorced from learning. This underlines the extent to which educators underestimate how learning and the language of learning — the medium — are crucially interrelated; that if more attention were devoted to ways of improving language development, through **contextualised use**, learning in **all**

areas would be greatly assisted. In practice, this implies that language development should be recognised as an **essential** and **common** pursuit. It implies a close collaborative relationship between ELT specialists and DE materials writers from the initial course planning stages rather than regarding an ESL component as something which is retrospectively 'applied'. It also implies that subject specialists should be more aware of the language implications of their subject and should, to a certain degree, assume responsibility for the language development of their learners.

A significant contributing factor is the insufficient training of many DE materials producers. Most have undertaken short initial training courses aimed to equip them rapidly with a range of DE instructional techniques which are 'neutral as to content', applicable to any subject. There was very little evidence of continuing and advanced training. In the circumstances, this is understandable since the majority of the DE courses are emergency programmes and material developers are under pressure to produce materials in a hurry. In addition, many of the DE institutions were small-scale organisations working within the traditional mainstream educational system and as such suffered from the sort of problems typical of this arrangement:

- * a dependency on the goodwill of busy lecturers for writing materials, whose commitments lie elsewhere, who tend to be wedded to face-to-face teaching methods and who often find the transition to DE difficult and time-consuming
- * facing the traditional academic scepticism, antagonism or indifference towards distance education (often resulting in low funding priority).

However, in effect, DE material producers have not had the opportunity to submit their work to a process of continual professional experimentation and evaluation and are left operating at the level of techniques without fully appreciating the theoretical principles that underpin these instructional methods. This tends to result in a rigid adherence to a template of techniques and standardised formats which are applied uniformly across subject areas. Although standardised formats provide a strong and reassuring framework for inexperienced DE writers, an inflexible adherence to them can be counter-productive since it tends to divert attention away from the crucial issue of adopting **methodologies** most appropriate for the activation of learning. They do not encourage material developers to adopt a more critical and selective stance towards the techniques they employ. Different subjects, tasks, level and learners require a range of differing teaching approaches. An unquestioning dependence on techniques for word and sentence simplification to help ESL learners comprehend from text can actually **create** both language and learning problems.

A related contributing factor here is the lack of research and evaluation on the part of DE institutions into the effectiveness of their materials as well as poorly coordinated student support systems. As a consequence, materials producers have little or no feedback on which to base improvements and

adaptations of materials; they have only generalised ideas about the characteristics and needs of their target groups.

In order to make materials effective, they need to be submitted to a process of continual revision and adaptation. A key underlying problem was the lack of appropriate technology such as desk top publishing. This results in an inability to adapt or respond to change quickly and cost effectively and to materials with an undesirably long shelf-life. In a sense, appropriate technology is the **baseline** since it provides the means to develop both materials and expertise.

On a more general level, DE material developers and administrators seemed to be working in professional isolation. There were, for example, few opportunities and forums for professional exchange both within and between DE institutions and limited access to literature crucially related to their work, e.g. contemporary subject-specific background reading materials to help them prepare their courses or inform them of new ideas with the DE world.

2.3 Implications

On the basis of these considerations, we feel that it is vitally important to find ways of developing the following four key objectives. These objectives fall into some areas which might appear to lie beyond the scope of the immediate research project but the research team is convinced that they are all so closely **interrelated** and **interdependent** that none of them can be ignored. For example, it is essential to develop a strong institutional base for the effective delivery of other objectives.

i) Developing and promoting awareness

Essentially, we are arguing for:

- a. An English-across-the-curriculum language policy within distance education courses for ESL learners, where the ESL development is integrated within the mainstream subject courses in contrast to the commonly used parallel **generalised** ELT and study skills courses.

This represents a recognition of:

- * the extent to which language - the medium of learning - and learning are crucially interrelated
 - * the diversity of language and the diversity of demands that are made upon it within different subject areas
 - * the effectiveness of courses based on learners' functional needs
 - * a shift away from the view of language as something to be learnt for its own sake towards the view of language as a vehicle for the transmission of ideas
- b. A heavy emphasis of ESL reading and writing development within the mainstream DE materials, which not only attempts to develop and prepare learners for the particular in-course tasks but which also strives to develop more broad-based skills. These skills should be presented and practised as **interdependent, integrated** tools of communication in contrast to the traditional view of skills as independent language processes.
 - c. An expanded view of the nature of readability and, in particular, readability for ESL. Material developers need to consider alternative ways of:

- * facilitating an ESL learner's comprehension from English-medium texts
 - * developing an ESL learner's abilities to comprehend from English-medium text
- d. A far greater **emphasis on methodology** - syllabus implementation - in addition to the traditional focus on syllabus specification. We strongly recommend a general shift away from transmission style teaching to more engaging, task-based, interactive learning methodologies.
 - e. An expanded view of **study skills** - a move away from the assumption that there are universals of academic behaviours and that learners possess inherent, invariant styles of learning towards a less prescriptive, task-based learning-orientated methodology which takes account of the differences in learning styles and language needs between learners from different backgrounds and aims to help learners consider the factors that affect their learning and, through guided experimentation, discover the learning strategies that suit them best.

The ESL development should therefore aim to enable learners to:

- * acquire communication skills **within context**
 - * identify and practise a wider range of language skills and learning strategies
 - * develop strategies for learning **through** English, i.e. text as a vehicle for information
- learner training/study skills component should aim to enable learners to:
- * consider their own learning attitudes and preferences
 - * experiment with different learning strategies
 - * take more responsibility for their own learning

It should provide learners with:

- * psychological preparation, e.g. activities to build confidence for experimenting with language
- * psychological preparation, e.g. activities to help learners understand and use metalanguage (language for describing language and language learning) and to become aware of the rationale behind activities
- * practice in self-direction, e.g. activities which provide learners with opportunities to make choices about their learning.

This may mean that writers adopt a more flexible and less linear, predetermined route through the content material, e.g. wide range of tasks for different learning styles, supplementary remedial loops.

There is a clear need to raise awareness of EDEP issues and to intergrate EDEP into existing and new DE materials and training courses. A key problem is that there are few consultants with experience and knowledge of both predominantly print-based, award-bearing DE courses and ELT. Current DE training courses for such materials treat the ESOL component in ad-hoc, simplistic and out-dated ways which, as we have seen, can actually create both language and learning problems. On the other hand, although there is substantial experience of DE in terms of **direct** English

language teaching, broadcasting, there is limited experience in **English-medium** print-based award-bearing DE courses. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that we are advocating a collaborative relationship between DE and ELT specialists since we feel it sets up a desirable pedagogical dialogue between practitioners who often have different modus operandi. For example, DE practitioners, who are geared towards economies of scale, often downplay the differences between learners and talk about 'good' courses in terms of quality. Classroom practitioners, like ELT teachers, are often keyed into learners differences and tend to talk in terms of **effectiveness**.

We have identified the following broad areas for development:

- * EDEP awareness-raising component in DE materials production and training courses
- * the promotion of long-term professional links between DE materials producers and ELT specialists and the production of materials and preferably at a local level where they will be more in tune with the local language situation
- * joint syllabus design and implementation between DE and ELT materials producers, particularly the development of appropriate methodologies to relate L2 language and study skills concerns to content areas
- * further research into the EDEP area at various levels and in various subjects

To a large extent, further research will emerge as the natural result of building an EDEP component into DE training courses and collaborative materials development. Nevertheless, the fact that it is a new area suggests that further theoretical and practical groundwork needs to be done in particular areas of the field by well-qualified ELT specialists who then make their findings widely available in a variety of means, particularly in a permanent written form such as practical manuals for DE material writers, reports/articles as well as contributions to DE/ELT workshop/seminars/conferences. This last point is vital as a lot of valuable academic research fails to reach the relevant practitioners.

ii) Training

We have identified the following broad areas for development:

- * long-term commitment to training for DE materials producers and administrators - initial, continuing and advanced
- * local-level training/importance of building up a core of local expertise who could then act as trainers/decision makers themselves

- * ESOL awareness-raising in training courses and materials production
- * development of evaluation/research component in training courses
- * DTP training

iii) Institutional Development

- * the development of an effective evaluation and research capability in various DE areas, e.g. materials production, student support system, mode of assessments, administration
- * development of an effective administrative capability
- * development of an effective tutorial support system
- * the provision of appropriate, effective technology and software for administrative purposes and materials development, e.g. DTP

iv) Access

- * the promotion of improved national/international links between DE institutions/agencies
- * wider access to DE and ESL research/literature
- * wider access to background reading materials for the production of DE courses, e.g. subject-specific literature
- * wider access to background reading for DE learners, e.g. supplementary reading materials. It appears to be clear that inexperienced local level practitioners will not be able to adapt materials from other countries effectively unless they have been given the opportunity to develop themselves professionally and to identify, with sufficient clarity, learner needs at a local level. It is on that basis that DE practitioners will be able to take the initiative themselves in pedagogic planning and adopt a more critical and selective stance towards the materials they use, and the way they introduce and use English language in the materials they develop.

As far as the agencies engaged in promoting DE are concerned, it appears reasonable for them to promote professional development among DE practitioners and involve themselves in promoting the **effectiveness** of materials (which implies that subject specialists, instructional designs and ELT experts have to be made to work together) and the effectiveness of administrative and tutorial support systems. Thirdly, ELT institutions and experts could invest some of their funds and time in the area identified as 'English for Distance Education Purposes' (EDEP for short).

REFERENCES AND NOTES

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Abbreviations used:

EFL - English as a foreign language; ELT - English Language Teaching; ESL - English as a second language; ESOL - English for speakers of other languages; FL - Foreign language; L₁ - First Language or Mother Tongue (MT); L₂ - Second language - in this context, usually English as a medium of instruction.