

# Print Materials in Distance Learning : Learners' View

R.R. MISHRA, NASIM AHMAD and N.K. RAI  
*Rajendra Agricultural University, Pusa, Bihar*

**Abstract :** *The print material is the main medium to impart distance teaching in many distance education institutions including the IGNOU. Though these institutions use other media, they are used only as supplementary to the print. Keeping the significance of the print medium in view, a study was conducted at one of the study centres of IGNOU, to find out what extent material is self-instructional and various other components related to print material and its effectiveness. The results of the study have been presented in this paper. One of the major finding of the study was that to a large extent students were satisfied with the quality of the material and the presentation of the content.*

## Introduction

In the distance education system, teaching has to be effected at a distance through various media of communication. Of all the media available for communication between the distance teacher and the distance learner in this system, the print material is the most important due to certain inherent qualities of the medium itself. It is relatively cheap. The message to be communicated to the receiver/learner is permanently written in indelible ink and the learner can read the message/content as and when he/she desires so. Neither infrastructure nor any electricity, nor any machine is required for reading the message from the print. That is why most of the open universities and other distance education institutions at global level use it for instructional purposes. In fact, it is the mainstay of distance education system all over the world. But the print material used in the open universities and other distance education institutions is different from that used in the conventional system of education. Absence of face-to-face contact between the learners and the teachers and the wide variations among learners in terms of age, educational background, financial status, availability of time for study, intellectual level, grasping capacity—responsibilities, family and social commitments etc. make it necessary that the print material is specially designed and carefully prepared to suit all the learners, meet all their educational requirements and help them learn on their own without much assistance from others. That is why it is also known as 'self-instructional' material. From an economic point of view too, it is relatively cheaper as compared to other media. This is an important factor in offering distance education programmes in the developing countries.

## **Methodology**

In order to derive maximum benefit from the primary medium of instruction, i.e. the print, we should make sure that the materials are self-instructional, the content is appropriate, its presentation is interesting to the learners, the subject matter is logically and gradually developed in simple language to motivate the students to complete their studies. Against this background, the various aspects of the print materials prepared and supplied by the Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi to its learners have been investigated and the findings have been presented in this paper.

For the purpose of investigation 22 learners out of the total of 173 learners admitted to the Bachelors' Degree Programme of the 1989 batch of IGNOU attached to the Ranchi Study Centre were selected by random sampling. Data/information related to the various aspects of the print material such as quality, usefulness, delivery, simplicity of the language used in the text, defects in presentation, adequacy of coverage, suggestions for improvement etc. were collected through a questionnaire. The data and information thus collected were analysed and interpreted. The results have been presented below.

### **Receipt of the print material on time**

The pre-condition for effective teaching-learning process is that the print material is received by the distance learners in time.

**Table-1: Receipt of the print material in time**

<b>Receipt in time</b>	<b>No. of learners</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Always	2	9.09
Sometimes	12	54.55
Never	8	36.36
Total	22	100

It is evident from Table-1 that out of 22 respondents in all, 2 (9.09%) reported that they received the print materials always in time, while 12 (54.55%) of them received it on time sometimes only and 8 (36.36%) reported that they never received the material on time (as specified in the programme guide). This indicates that by and large, the IGNOU learners did not receive the print material in time and they had to suffer on this account.

### **Self-instructional nature of the printed text**

The print materials of IGNOU are claimed to be self-instructional in nature. Teacher is built into the text to remove the difficulties of the learners that may arise during their study. Therefore, the course writers are believed to have taken care of all the aspects of the materials and the problems of the learners that may crop up during their study. What do the students say?

**Table-2: Learners' views on the Self-instructional nature of the text**

Nature of the material/ extent of self- instructionality →	Fully self- instructional		Partially self-instructional		Total	
	No. of learners	Percentage	No. of learners	Percentage	No. of learners	Percentage
Stream ↓						
10+2	7	58.34	5	41.66	12	100.00
Non-10+2	2	20.00	8	80.00	10	100.00
Total	9	40.91	13	59.09	22	100.00

Table-2 indicates that out of 22 selected learners, 9 (40.91%) found the material fully self-instructional and 13 (59.09%) described partially self-instructional. Further analysis of the data indicated that among the learners of the non 10+2 category, 80 percent of them found the material partially self-instructional and only 20 percent of them described it as fully self-instructional. A different trend was noticeable among the learners of 10+2 stream in which 7 (58.34%) out of 12 described the material as fully self-instructional. Comparatively a higher percentage of the learners in this category described the material as fully self-instructional. The fact that majority of the non 10+2 learners did not find the material fully self-instructional indicates that probably the level of these learners from the non 10+2 stream had not been taken into consideration by the course writers while developing the material.

### ***The need of a teacher***

Theoretically, the print material should be so designed that the learners should not feel the absence of the teacher during their study. The investigation, however, revealed that most of the learners (21 out of 22) felt the need of a teacher at times during their study. This aspect of the IGNOU materials needs further investigation.

### ***Simplicity of the language***

In the distance education print materials, the language should be simple to the extent possible. The investigation revealed that 10 out of the 22 distance learners (45.45%) found the language always 'simple' while 12 of them (54.55%) opined it was simple sometimes only (Table-3). When analysed stream-wise, the data revealed that in the 10+2 stream of learners, 9 out of 12 (75.00%) found the language always simple while 3 (25.00%) thought it was 'simple' sometimes only. The reverse was the case with non 10+2 stream in which 90.00 per cent learners (9 out of 10) opined that the language used in the text was 'simple' only sometimes. The figures gave a clear indication that while writing the self-instructional materials, the language level of the 10+2 stream of learners had been taken into account. However, probably not much care was given to the language needs of non 10+2 stream learners. The investigation leads to the conclusion that a considerable percentage of learners found the language 'simple' only sometimes (see Table-3).

Table-3: Simplicity of the language of the self-instructional material

Language →	Always simple		Sometimes simple		Total	
	No. of learners	Percentage	No. of learners	Percentage	No. of learners	Percentage
10+2	9	75.00	3	25.00	12	100.00
Non 10+2	1	10.00	9	90.00	10	100.00
Total	10	45.45	12	54.55	22	100.00

### Need for simplification of the language used in the materials

The language used in the material has to be straight forward, simple, clear and unambiguous so as to enable the distance learners to learn through the materials effectively. If the need for simplification of the language is felt, it must be carried out in order to facilitate effective communication between the distance learners and the distance teachers without which learning in the real sense cannot take place.

Table-4: Need for simplification of the language used in the material

Simplification →	Needed		Not Needed		Total	
	No. of learners	Percentage	No. of learners	Percentage	No. of learners	Percentage
10+2	6	50.00	6	50.00	12	100.00
Non 10+2	9	90.00	1	10.00	10	100.00
Total	15	68.18	7	31.82	22	100.00

Table-4 presents the overall as well as the streamwise picture regarding the need for simplification of the textual language. It is evident from the table that 68.18 per cent (15 out of 22) felt the need to simplify the language used in the text while 31.82 per cent (7 out of 22) did not feel any need for simplification of the language. Streamwise analysis shows that 90 per cent learners of the non 10+2 stream were in favour of simplification of the language, while it was 50% in 10+2 stream who wanted it. The table gives a clear picture that a good number of distance learners wanted the language of the text to be simplified.

### Clarity of expression

The content should be clearly expressed in the print material supplied to the distance learners.

Learners' reactions regarding the clarity of expression of the content have been presented in Table-5. A perusal of the table reveals that 18 (81.82%) out of 22 learners reported that the expression was clear. Only 4 (18.18%) of them described the content was not clearly expressed.

**Table-5: Clarity of expression of content**

Expression →	Clear		Not clear		Total	
	No. of learners	Percentage	No. of learners	Percentage	No. of learners	Percentage
10+2	12	100.00	0	00.00	12	100.00
Non 10+2	6	60.00	4	40.00	10	100.00
Total	18	81.82	4	18.18	22	100.00

In 10+2 stream of learners, cent-percent of them were of the view that the content was clearly expressed. The learners of the non 10+2 stream, 6 (60%) found the expression clear. This observation confirms that by and large, the content was expressed clearly.

### Logical presentation of the content

The subject matter should be presented logically and gradually to motivate and enable the learners for study successfully.

Out of the 22 learners selected for study, 14 (63.64%) opined that the development of the content was 'always' logical and gradual. The responses of the remaining 8 (36.36%) were somewhat different. In their opinion, it was only 'sometimes' that the content was developed logically and gradually.

**Table-6: Logical development of the content**

Logical and gradual presentation	Always		Sometimes		Never		Total	
	No. of Learners	Percentage	No. of Learners	Percentage	No. of Learners	Percentage	No. of Learners	Percentage
Stream								
10+2	10	83.33	2	16.67	0	00.00	12	100.00
Non 10+2	4	40.00	6	60.00	0	00.00	10	100.00
Total	14	63.64	8	36.36	0	00.00	22	100.00

The table-6 shows that 14 out of 22 selected learners (63.64%) were of the view that the development of the content was 'always' logical and gradual. At the same time, 8 (36.36%) reported that it was so only 'sometimes'. The stream-wise analysis shows that majority of the 10+2 group of learners always found the content logically and gradually developed. However, the investigation revealed that 60 per cent of the non 10+2 learners found that the content was developed logically and gradually only 'sometimes'. Out of 8 learners giving such responses, 6 (75.00%) were from this group. This provides strength to the argument that it was the non 10+2 stream of learners, who, by and large, found it somewhat difficult to negotiate with the material as compared with their counterparts in 10+2 stream. Once again, it points out towards the necessity of taking into account the educational level of this group of learners while preparing the material.

### *Attractiveness of the cover-page, type-face etc.*

A book with an attractive appearance is quite helpful in drawing the attention of the

learners and arousing their interest for study. As many as 16 (72.73%) learners reported that the cover page, type-faces etc. of the print material provided by IGNOU were 'always' attractive, only 6 (27.27%) of them found these components of the print material 'sometimes' attractive. On the whole, the print material of IGNOU was found to be attractive.

### ***Format of presentation of the content***

The content when presented in the self-instructional format attracts the attention of the learners and motivates them for study. 'Format' here means the access devices.

**Table-7: Format of presentation of the content**

<b>Format/ Presentation</b>	<b>No. of learners</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Very Good	7	31.82
Good	12	54.55
Average	3	13.63
Poor	0	00.00
Total	22	100.00

As shown in Table-7, 7 (31.82%) learners described the format of presentation of the content as 'very good' and as many as 12 (54.55%) learners expressed the view that the presentation of the content was good. This amply indicates that by and large, the learners found the presentation of the content 'good'.

### **Relevance of the content**

The content should be relevant to the needs of the society.

Among the 22 learners, 7 (31.82%) expressed the view that they found the content 'fully relevant' to the societal needs. As many as 15 out of 22 (68.18%) described the content as 'partially relevant' to the needs of the society. It leads to conclude that more than two-thirds of learners found the content partially relevant to the needs of the society. This aspect of the materials needs serious rethinking.

### ***Quality of the content***

The content of the print material should be of a high quality mainly for two reasons. First, the print material is the mainstay of distance education system and learners are mainly dependent on it for their study. Second, it is an index to the standard of education being imparted to the learners by the university/institution. The analysis of the feedback from students suggests that most of the learners found the content to be of 'good quality', though the 'quality' was not defined by a rigorous set of criteria.

Table-8 shows that five (22.72%) learners described the content as of high quality. A large proportion of the learners (63.64%) held the view that the content of the print material was of good quality. This indicates that the quality of the content was generally viewed to be good.

**Table-8: Quality of content of the print material**

Quality	No. of learners	Percentage
High	5	22.72
Good	14	63.64
Average	3	13.64
Poor	0	00.00
Total	22	100.00

***Usefulness of the content of the print material***

The content of the print material should be useful to the learners in their real-life situations during and after their study. The views of the learners on this aspect are presented in Table-9.

**Table-9: Usefulness of the content of the print material**

Usefulness	No. of learners	Percentage
Very useful	10	45.45
Useful	12	54.55
Not useful	0	00.00
Total	22	100.00

The investigation suggests that all the learners found the content useful in their real life-settings. Ten (45.45%) of the learners opined that the content was 'very useful'. Remaining 12 (54.55%) found the content 'useful' in their everyday life. The findings suggest that the content of the print material is seen as useful by the learners.

**Suggestions for improvement of the print material**

In distance education system, the print material has to be reviewed, revised, improved and updated regularly so that it remains useful to the learners. The learners found the print material had some limitations. The limitations have not been presented here as they were fully reflected in the suggestions for improvement.

The learners were asked to offer their suggestions for improving the print material. The responses have been presented in Table-10.

**Table-10: Suggestions for improvement of the print material**

Suggestions	No. of learners (N = 18)	Percentage
Use simple language	11	61.11
Give more elaborate descriptions	7	38.89
Despatch the print materials in time	3	16.67
Provide a more elaborate glossary	3	16.67

A perusal of the table indicates that altogether 18 learners out of 22 (81.82%) offered suggestions for improving the print material. Eleven (61.11%) learners were of the view that comparatively simpler language should be used in the text so that they could

understand the subject matter easily on their own. Seven (38.89%) learners suggested that there should be more elaborate description of the content so that the matter is fully covered and they did not have to face any difficulty in understanding the content. Three (16.67%) wanted the print material to be sent to learners on time so that they would not have to suffer on that account. Again 3 (16.67%) suggested that an elaborate glossary for difficult words should be provided in the print material to make reading easier.

### **Conclusion**

On the basis of this study, it can be concluded that more or less the learners found the print material clearly expressed and relevant to the societal needs. They were satisfied with the quality of the material and the presentation of the content. They found the text useful, logically developed and attractive.

But there were some problems too. Most of the learners did not receive the print material on time. Perhaps, a little more care is needed to ensure the timely delivery of the print materials. The other important problem was that most of the learners of the non 10+2 stream found the language of the material difficult while their counterparts in 10+2 stream felt the other way. It is the non 10+2 group of learners who were in favour of simplification of the language. Taking into consideration the standard that has to be maintained, the problems that the learners had to face and the suggestions offered by them, simplification needs to be carried out and/or it may be supported by a more elaborate glossary. At certain points, the matter had been described in brief. A little more elaboration in these cases is likely to help the learners a lot in understanding the subject matter.

In a nutshell, gearing up the delivery system and little modification, revision and simplification of the material as well as the language will prove to be very helpful to the learners in comprehending the text. These changes would make reading more interesting and thus motivate the IGNOU learners to study with more enthusiasm. Properly revised IGNOU print material can play an important role in making the innovative system of distance education a success in a developing country like India.

[**R.R. Mishra**, is Assitant Professor at Department of Agricultural Economics, Rajendra Agricultural University, Pusa-848125, Samastipur, Bihar, India.

**Nasim Ahmad**, is Computer Programmer at Department of Agricultural Economics, Rajendra Agricultural University, Pusa-848125, Samastipur, Bihar, India.

**Dr. N.K. Rai** holds the position of Director in Extension Education, Directorate of Extension Education, Rajendra Agricultural University, Pusa-848125, Samastipur, Bihar, India.]