

Quality of Instructional Materials of M Ed Programme of BOU : A Critical Assessment

Selina Akhter

School of Education, Bangladesh Open University, Gazipur-1705, Bangladesh.

Abstract

There is no doubt that the factors, which determine the quality of the instructional materials of any education program, particularly in distance education, instructional materials themselves are by far the most important. This paper presents the findings of an evaluation of the instructional materials of M Ed programme of BOU. This study was conducted on 48 sampled students employing a quantitative method i.e. survey. Findings explored some positive aspects of the materials as well as some limitations too. For quality assurance of the programme it is crucially important to improve the standard of the materials.

1. Introduction

“With the explosion of knowledge on one hand, and the population explosion on the other, coupled with paucity of fully trained and competent teachers necessitated the modern society to make use of open/distance education for informing and enlightening the prospective and aspirant learners at all levels of education” (Bedi and Dutt, 2000). Taking into cognizance the fact the School of Education (SoE) of BOU has introduced its Master of Education (M Ed) programme since 1999 for practicing teachers, teacher educators, education managers with a view to equip them with required knowledge, understanding and skills for performing their due roles and responsibilities through excelling their professional competencies (BOU, 2002). Despite the philosophy of using various technological devices in delivery of open and distance education in modern era of science and technology, print materials still are being used as the primary mode of delivery of instruction in M Ed programme like many other universities in the globe.

Maintaining quality of instructional materials is essential for maintaining quality of any education programme. Quality of self-instructional materials underlies multiple factors. As stated by Mishra, Ahmad and Rai (2001), “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.”

The MEd programme has in total 18 print course books. Each course materials is developed by a course development team, which include individual teachers from the faculty as well as others. The task of materials development of the programme included a logical and systematic process of writing, referring, editing, style designing, etc. as are followed in open and distance learning universities.

Systematic evaluation of the course materials of any programme is imperative to detect their deficiencies as well as explore the areas of improvement. It is also necessary to modify the course materials to suit the changing characteristics of the stakeholders, which is particularly important for distance education materials. This paper reveals the findings of such a pioneering study aimed at evaluating the quality of the course materials of M Ed programme of BOU.

2. Objectives

The study aimed to derive the following three specific objectives:

1. To analyze the profile of M Ed students.
2. To find out the reaction of the students on different aspects of instructional materials of M Ed programme
3. To elicit suggestions from the respondents for improving the quality of the instructional materials.

3. Significance of the Study

Obtaining feedback from the students on different aspects of a programme is crucial for quality assurance. The inputs and observation received from them are critical for their improvement. Therefore, it was considered very much relevant to study the reaction of the students on various aspects of instructional materials of the M Ed programme of BOU. Reactions of the students to the different aspects of instructional materials, as received in this study, will help in making necessary modifications and improvement of them in the future and thereby transforming the instructional materials of M Ed programme in to quality materials, which is one of the prerequisites of quality assurance in both conventional and distance mode of education.

4. Research Methodology

Approach: To address the specific objectives a qualitative method was followed for the purpose of the study. Since the study concerned assessing the quality of instructional materials of M Ed programme of BOU, the view of the stakeholders i.e. the students were obtained through the use of quantitative method.

Methodology: The study was based on primary data. For generating primary data a sample survey was conducted employing a questionnaire.

Sample Design: For the purpose of investigation 48 students of M Ed programme, enrolled in two tutorial centers of Dhaka was sampled, through the use of simple random sampling technique.

Development of Instrument: To assess the quality of instructional materials this study made use of an interview questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. Part one was related with students' background information and part two dealt with the instructional design aspects of the course materials. It contained 23 structured questions and 2 close-ended questions on different aspects of quality instructional materials to elicit students view on the strengths and weaknesses of the materials.

The questionnaire was developed in two steps process-planning. Related literatures were first studied to identify the aspects to be covered by the present studies. A draft questionnaire was developed basing the identified aspects through the literature review. It was then pre-tested on a similar group of students to identify the lapses and weaknesses of the tool and for suggestions for improvement. Based on the findings from the pre-testing, the data collection tool was modified and finalized. The final version of questionnaire was administered in Bangla, the instructional medium of M Ed programme.

Data Processing and Analysis: Data processing included checking, editing and coding the filled-in questionnaire. For analysis of data qualitative method was followed, which made use of simple descriptive statistics, like percentage and rank. As the data were quantitative in nature, they were organized keeping sequence among the events.

5. Findings

The collected data were analyzed in terms of (A) learners' profile and (B) students' view about different aspects of the instructional materials, which are presented in the following bars, charts and tables.

A. Students' Profile

As is revealed by the data, majority (54.17%) of the M Ed students belonged to age group 36-40. Majority (56.25%) of them were by profession school teachers. It is clear from the findings that the programme has also been able in catering people other than school teachers such as college teachers, curriculum specialists, education managers, etc. Thus, it is fulfilling one of the major objectives of M Ed programme.

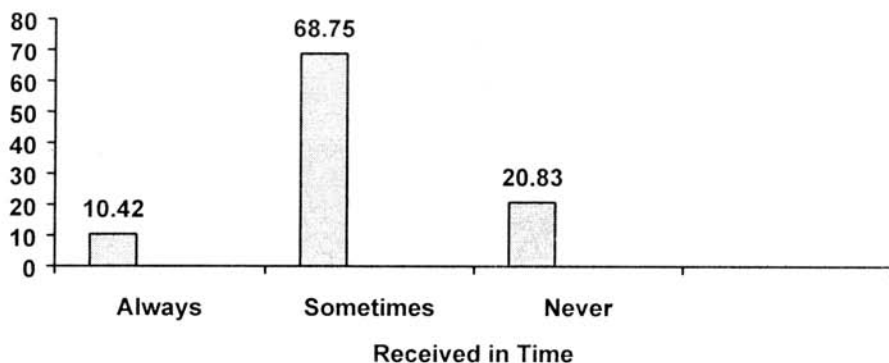
Table 1: Respondents' Profile

Sex	Number of Students	Percentage
Male	32	66.67
Female	16	33.33
Total	48	100
Age		
26-30	1	2.08
31-35	12	25.00
36-40	26	54.17
41-50	09	18.75
Total	48	100
Profession		
Teaching in secondary schools	27	56.25
Head Teacher	06	12.50
Teaching in colleges	03	6.25
Curriculum Specialist	03	6.25
Education Manager (project officer, upazila education officer, upazila academic supervisor)	09	18.75
Total	48	100
Educational Background		
BA/BSc/BCom	13	27.08
M A/MSc/MCom	35	72.91
Total	48	100
Professional Degree		
B Ed or equivalent	37	77.08
C in Ed	03	6.25
No professional degree	08	16.67
Total	48	100

B. Students' View about Different Aspects of Instructional Materials

i. Receipt of Instructional Materials

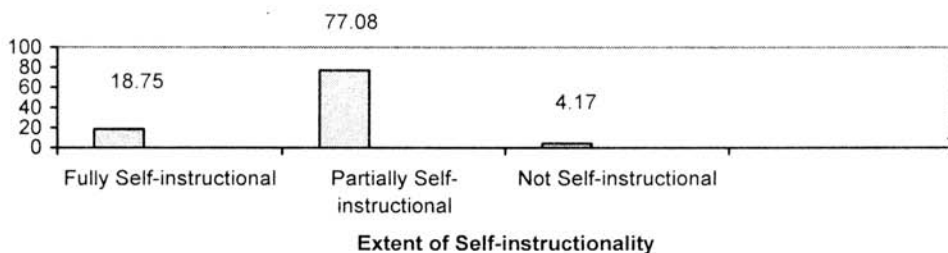
“The precondition for effective teaching-learning process is that the print materials is received by the distance learners in time” (Mishra, Ahmad and Rai, 2001). However, as evident in the following chart, only 10.42 students reported that they always received the materials in time. Majority (68.75%) opined that they sometimes received those in time, while a significant percentage (20.83%) said they never received those in time. These findings indicate that by and large MED learners did not receive instructional materials timely i. e. at the commencement of the semester. This is a major cause of students' suffering and dissatisfaction, which might also caused delaying course finishing as well as contribute to the deterioration of quality of the programme.

Figure 1: Students' View on Receipt of Course Materials on Time

ii. Self-instructional Nature of the Course Materials

According to Figure 2, less than one fifth (18.75%) of the respondents identified the course materials of MED programme as 'fully self-instructional'. Little less than 80% of the sampled learners described them as 'partially self-instructional', while a few of them (4.17%) found the material 'not self-instructional'.

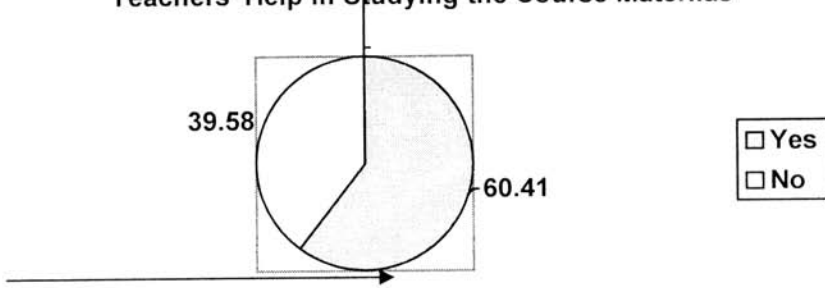
Identification of the materials as 'partially self-instructional' by great majority indicates that perhaps the characteristics of a fully self-instructional materials were not maintained in developing the course materials of M Ed programme. But, the philosophy of distance education is that instructional materials should be written in fully self-instructional manner to mitigate the isolation of the learners from teachers and institution. Holmberg (1983) stated that one way of achieving this is designing materials in such a way to enable the learners to have an internal didactic conversation, i.e. to talk to themselves about the subject matter and ideas they encounter in a text. He, therefore, suggested for certain key instructional devices to incorporate in the text to facilitate students' use of the text. The reflection of these devices in the instructional materials of MEd programme, therefore, should be ensured to confirm their self-instructional nature.

Figure 2: Students' View on Self-instructional Nature of the Course Materials

iii. Need of Tutors' Help

Theoretically, the print materials of distance and open education should be designed in such way so that learners do not feel isolation from teachers during their study time i.e. they will be able to go their own pace following the instructions of the materials. But, the

Figure 3: Students' View about the Need of Teachers' Help in Studying the Course Materials



inquiry in this regard revealed that most of the learners felt the need of teachers at time of their study. This is perhaps due to not writing the materials in a fully self-instructional way as found in the above sub-section. This finding should be kept in consideration during future renewal and modification and development of the course materials.

iv. Simplicity and Clarity of Language

The language of an self-instructional material should be simple and precise, should cover basic essentials and stimulate further thinking (Tapan, 1987).

Table 2: Students' View about Simplicity and Clarity of Language

Aspects	Always Simple		Sometimes Simple		Total	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
Simplicity	15	31.25	33	68.75	48	100
Clarity	Always Clear to understand		Sometimes clear to understand			
	14	29.17	34	70.83	48	100

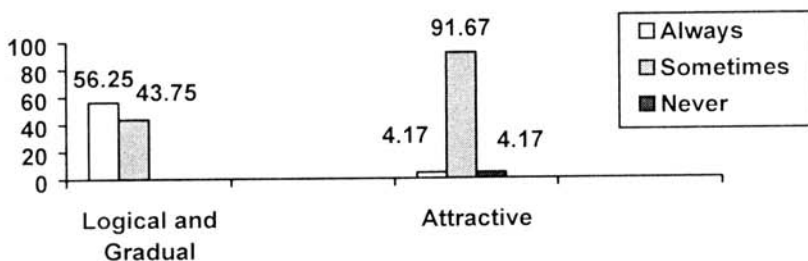
When students were asked for their opinion on simplicity and clarity of the language, majority (68.75%) agreed that the language used in the course materials were 'sometimes simple' to understand the contents and approximately 31.00% found it 'always simple' to grasp the contents and issues explained in the course materials. Regarding clarity of the language almost similar percentages of the respondents were holding same views. From this it could be said that the language of M Ed course materials was not always user friendly. Much care is, therefore, needed with regard to the use of language of the printed course materials of M Ed programme as language style is recognized to be very much important in writing distance education print materials. Rowntree (1999) suggested

the use of user-friendly language for writing such materials. The tip provided by Race (1995) is also pertinent in this regard in which he mentioned, "Use short, simple sentence rather than long, complex one. Aim to get your meaning across on the first reading of each sentence." Much care is, therefore, needed with regards to the use of language in writing the course materials.

v. Presentation of the Contents

It is expected that the learning activities of any instructional materials should be presented in logical, gradual and attractive manner to motivate learners and make them able in grasping the contents consistently and spontaneously. As found in this study little more than fifty percent (56.25%) of the M Ed students were of the view that the development of the contents was 'always logical and gradual'. At the same time a

Figure 4: Students' View about Presentation of Contents

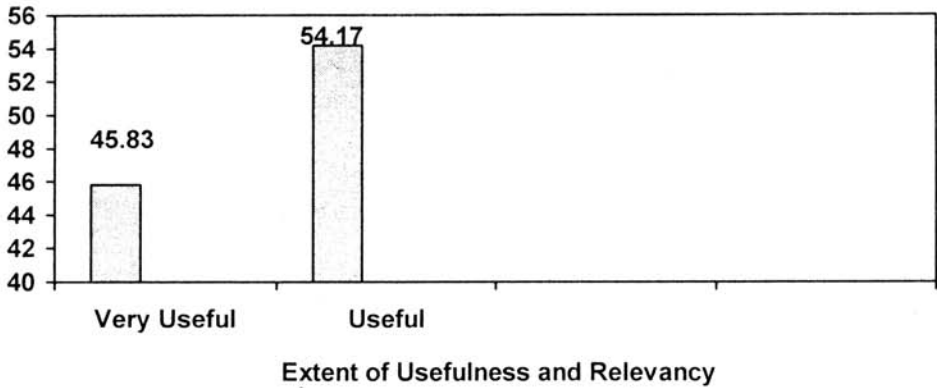


significant portion of the respondents (43.75) opined that the contents were only 'sometimes logical and gradual'. When students were inquired of the attractiveness of the presentation style of the materials, only a few (4.17%) found them always attractive and great majority (91.67%) described them 'sometimes attractive'. Some (4.17%) of them also found the materials 'not at all attractive'. These findings lead to argue that the subject matters by and large were not presented in a fully logical, gradual and attractive manner, which is a precondition of quality materials. The findings thus suggest further improvement of the course materials of M Ed programme in these respects.

vi. Usefulness and Relevancy of the Contents

It is always expected that the contents of any instructional materials should suit to the needs of the learners and the society. In case of teacher education programme it should be capable of equipping the stakeholders with required knowledge, understanding and skills so that they can play desired role of preparing future generation for nation building activities. During this investigation M Ed learners were asked whether the contents of the programme were suitable and relevant to their professional needs. The views of the respondents in this regard are furnished in the following figure.

Figure 5: Students' View about Usefulness and Relevancy of the Contents to their Profession

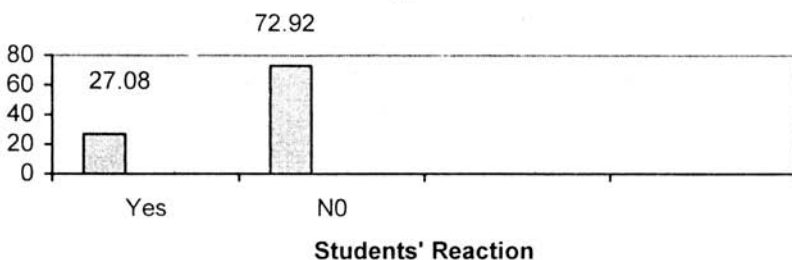


The investigation suggests that all the learners found the contents useful to their professional needs. However, they differed in magnitude of usefulness in which 45.83% stated them 'very useful' and 54.17 said 'useful'. This finding suggests to infer that the contents of M Ed course materials were able to keep pace with the professional requirements of various groups of the stakeholders, as enrolled in this study programme.

vii. Time Factors and Content Load

When students were asked whether they could finish all the course materials within stipulated time great majority responded to it negatively. Figure 6 shows that almost three fourth of the students found it difficult to complete the course materials within the allocated time. This perceived mismatch between the allocated time and volume of the contents needs proper investigation to explore the responsible factors and thereby taking necessary steps to improve the situation. Logical adjustment between allocated time and volume of course materials is also an imperative to help learners to grasp the contents well and efficiently.

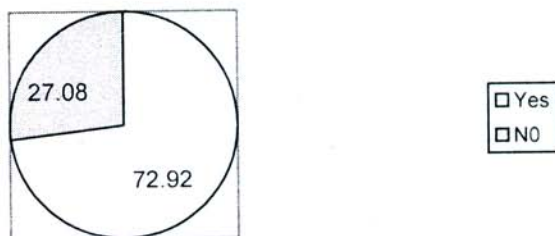
Figure 6: Students' View about the Time and Content Coverage



viii. Updated Concepts, Information and Statistics

The content of any quality instructional materials should contain updated information, concepts and statistics to let the students to have a look of current situation in the field of their study. Among the 48 students interviewed 35 (72.92%) expressed the view that they found the contents to contain updated information and statistics. However, a mentionable number, 13 out of 48 (27.08%), of them described the contents as 'not updated'. From this it is clear that about one fourth of the M Ed students were in favor of incorporating more updated information and statistics where necessary, which should be taken in to cognizance of the M Ed course development teams.

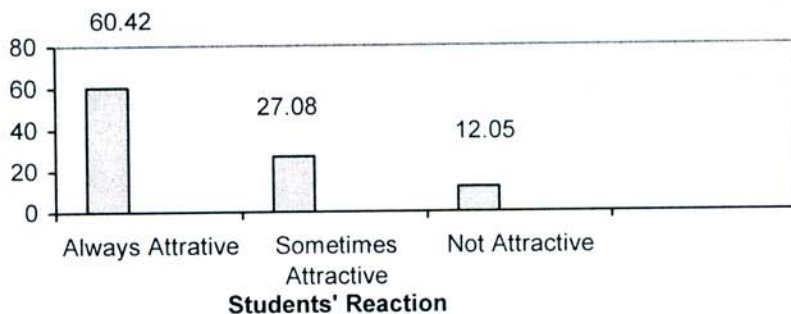
Figure 7: Students' View about the Updatedness of the Concepts, Information and Statistics



ix. Attractiveness of Cover Page and Type Face

Learners' reaction regarding attractiveness of the cover page, type face etc. is presented in Figure 8. A perusal of the data reveals that as many as 60% of the M Ed students

Figure 8: Students' View about Attractiveness of Cover Page and Type Face



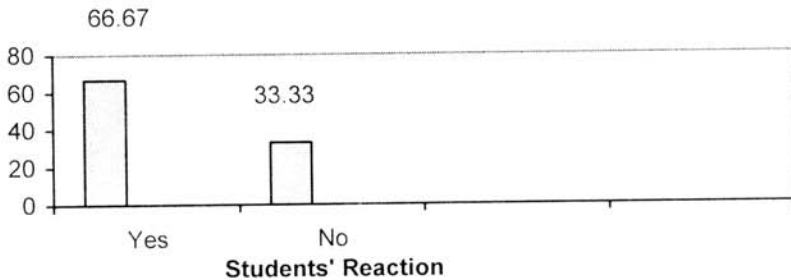
found the appearance of the materials was 'always attractive'. About 27% identified them as 'sometimes attractive' and only 12% regarded them as 'not attractive'. An instructional materials with attractive appearance is quite conducive and crucial in drawing the attention, excelling motivation and arousing interest among the learners. The finding in this regard amply indicates that by and large the M Ed instructional materials

were able to maintain all these characteristics and thereby were capable to attract the learners by their physical appearance.

x. Reflection of the Objectives in the Contents

Contents of any instructional material generally reflect some pre-specified objectives stated in the curriculum. In case of self-instructional materials these are stated in terms of behavioral objective at the commencement of each lesson. It is generally expected the more the precise reflection of objectives in the contents, the better the achievement of the learner is. As evident in Figure 9, majority of the respondents were of the view that the objectives of M Ed course materials were reflected in the contents properly. Despite this positive view, about one fourth opined negatively i.e. they were not satisfied with the reflection of the objectives in the course materials.

Figure 9: Students' View about the Reflection of Objectives in the Contents



xi. Usefulness of the Study Guidance included in the Course Materials

One distinctive feature of self-instructional materials is that individual learner should have the facility of using the instructional guidance presented in the instructional materials rather than merely being told about them. Absence of this kind of guidance may hinder students' learning in the desired manner. When students were asked for their opinion about the usefulness of study guidance included in the course materials, absolute majority (93.75%) reported positively i.e. they found them 'very much useful' in going through the contents. Very few of them, only 3 out of 48, termed them as 'not useful'.

xii. Extent of Self-assessment Questions (ASQ), Chart, Diagram, Table and Example

"The provision of exercises, activities or self-assessment questions is the mechanism by which the key objectives associated with a teaching text are realized and students allowed to practice them" (Lockwood, 1988). In the materials of open and distance learning it is desired that they should include enough number of appropriate questions in the form of in-text questions and exercises to assist learners for self-assessment through active participation in the learning process. But, when students were asked to give their opinion on the extent of self-assessment questions, the majority (54.17%) pointed that these were 'inadequate' to assess their learning progress and reinforcement of their learning. The number of chart, diagram, table as used in this study were also described by the majority

of the learners (72.91%) as 'inadequate'. On the contrary, majority (66.66%) of the respondents viewed the examples used in the course materials as 'adequate' while about one third viewed them as 'inadequate'. Inclusion of adequate number of chart, diagram, table can help learners to understand things easily. It helps to keep learners going a page with something visual, which is more conducive to conceptualize the whole thing at a glance than a solid page. The course development teams of M Ed programme should take it in to cognizance for easier and smooth understanding of the contents.

Table 3: Students' View about SAQ, Chart, Diagram, Table and Examples

Chart, Diagram, Table and Examples	Adequate		Inadequate		Total	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
	22	45.83	26	54.17	48	100
Adequacy of SAQ	13	27.08	35	72.91	48	100
Adequacy of examples	32	66.66	16	33.33	48	100

xiii. Limitations of the Course Materials and Suggestions for Improvement

In the end of this inquiry, the respondents were asked to answer two open ended

Table 4: Limitations of the Course Materials as Viewed by the Learners

Rank Order	Limitations	No. of Learners	Percentage
1	Contents of some books are too heavy in relation to allocated credit hour and some are too thin to understand the contents.	29	60.42
2	Occurrence of spelling mistakes.	20	41.67
3	Repetition of some contents in different course materials.	19	39.58
4	Contradictory information in some course books.	16	33.33
5	Lack of lucidity in language.	13	27.08
6	Incompleteness of some contents and concepts.	10	20.83

questions- (1) limitations of the course materials and (2) suggestions for improvement. In answering the first question students identified some limitations of the course materials, some of which have already been reflected in the analysis of findings. The rest are presented in rank order in the Table 4.

The learners put forward the following suggestive measures for improvement of the print materials.

Table 5: Suggestions for Improvement of the Course Materials

Rank Order	Suggestions	No. of Learners	Percentage
1	Avoid repetition of same contents in different books.	30	62.5
2	Reduce the contents of the materials, which are too heavy.	28	58.33
3	Dispatch the materials in time.	26	54.17
4	Use simple and lucid language.	25	52.08
5	Provide updated information.	24	50.00
6	Increase number of self assessment questions.	23	47.92
7	Eliminate spelling mistake.	20	41.67
8	Use required examples from national and international perspective.	19	39.58
9	Make the presentation style more attractive.	16	33.33
10	Give precise and complete description of the contents.	15	
11	Maintain balance between credit hour and volume of course material.	9	18.75
12	Provide audio-video cassette/CD to supplement the print materials	6	12.50

6. Conclusion

The above findings lead to conclude that M Ed programme of SOE of BOU has been able to create its credibility to diversified group of people working for planning, development and implementing education sector programmes of the country. The reaction of the sampled students on some major components of the print materials were found positive. They explored that the contents were logically and gradually arranged; was useful to their professional requirements; the information, concepts and statistics were updated. They also were satisfied with the appearance of the cover page and type face. To their view the course objectives were reflected properly in the contents. The study guidance provided in the course materials was also identified as useful and the examples used in describing the contents were adequate.

Despite these positive aspects the instructional materials have some deficiencies too, which need utmost consideration for their future improvement. Most of the learners did not receive the course materials in time. The other problems were majority found the language 'not always simple', which means language was in general difficult to understand in many cases. Majority also viewed that the contents were not written in fully self-instructional way and for this absolute majority felt the need of tutor's presence during study of the materials. Monohar (1999) also identified lack of self instructional style and methodology as a major impediment in quality assurance of distance education.

According to him writing of these materials by teachers without having any training in distance education is the major cause of absence of self-instructionality. Another significant finding was that majority of the sampled students were not satisfied with the volume of contents against allocated credit hour. Moreover, the self-assessment questions, chart, diagram, table etc. were termed as inadequate by the learners. Besides, students identified some other problems with regards to the course materials. They were spelling mistakes, repetition of some contents in different course materials, lack of language lucidity, incompleteness of some concepts and contents, etc.

Taking in to cognizance all these quality issues of the instructional materials it is pertinent to suggest that SOE should make concerted effort to improve the quality of

M Ed instructional materials through undertaking necessary steps, such as reviewing, analyzing the materials and conducting similar studies on a broader context. The following suggestions could be useful in this regard.

- Organize orientation programme for the writer in order to orient them with the task of writing lesson so that lessons may conform to the self-instructional pattern of distance education.
- Print course materials should be reviewed periodically.
- Make the lesson simple with the use of short and precise sentences and use simple words in the sentences. A language editor could be commissioned in this regard to edit the language in connection with the subject specialist.
- Proof reading should be done well by subject experts and professional proof-reader.
- Logical consistence should be maintained between page number of the materials and the allocated credit hour.
- Include required number of chart, diagram and self-assessment questions to make the materials self-explanatory and facilitate students' self-evaluation.
- Overlapping, repetitions should be avoided.
- And Dispatch the instructional materials to the learners in time.
- And finally, standards of the materials should be seriously considered in every step by the course development team for assurance of quality.

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