Feedback on Self-Leaning Materials (SLMs) of the Junior School Certificate (JSC) Program of the Open School of Bangladesh Open University: Select Case Studies

Theme: Formal Education
Sub-theme: Open Schooling

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1   Introduction

The Open School of Bangladesh Open University (BOU-OS) uses print-based self-learning materials (SLMs) for its Junior School Certificate (JSC) program (Grade: 6-8) for the disadvantaged children graduated from the community/non-formal education (NFE) schools run by the NGOs under their innovative ways. The program was launched in 2007 under a project in association with the NGO coalition, Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE). This networking organization has been very popular in the delivery of capacity building program for its member NGOs which have the NFE program. CAMPE is highly expert in developing NFE materials for continuing education (CE) program which is run under open and distance learning (ODL) approach and that's why this is, sometimes, termed as Open NFE program in the field of education (Rahman & Panda, 2009). Both organizations have been very professional in developing self-learning materials. These two partnered organization developed curriculum under a joint effort and subsequently, based on the curriculum, developed Grade-6 SLMs using BOU in-house style and the program launched. After that texts for Grade-7 and 8 were developed, and the JSC program was implemented, a field level study was undertaken to study the level of experiences on Grade 6 texts. Self-Learning Material (SLM) refers to teaching materials that can be used the learners without the assistance of teacher. These materials keep the learners active and help to improve their cognitive skills. Therefore, quality of the materials has been paramount important for ensuring program quality as whole. This study investigates the most suitable strategies for improving the quality of the JSC texts, and in the process case studies have been cited to explain the strategies adopted.

2   Aims and objectives

The main aim of this paper is to find out most appropriate strategy for producing the learning materials which is feasible for the JSC program. The specific objectives of the current research are:

- to analyze the attitude and preferences of the existing tutors involved in distance teaching-learning activities of the JSC program;
- to promote the key concepts and principles of improving quality of the learning materials for open school programs;
- to raise awareness of the different dimensions of SLMs that need to be considered when establishing and maintaining quality;
- to capitalize on understanding of the different parts of the strategy in terms of the tools /techniques of material development to enhance learning activities for the learners in the School;
- to discuss what immediate steps taken in the Grade 7 & 8 for implementing quality assurance in materials;

3 Statement of problem

The School deals with is how the learners could enhance their learning activity with SLMs. The major problems with the learners of the JSC program are highly disadvantaged who are lacks of access to computer to use ICT leaning materials. Therefore, print is the only useful learning materials with high quality. But the School faces the problem in preparing good quality text at the beginning of the project and subsequently, it takes the policy of field level experience from the end users. The investigator therefore attempts to test the effectiveness of this approach. The research problem, therefore, is stated as:

"The question motivating the study was: Do JSC texts receive implicit negative feedback from tutors and learners, and whether they are ill-formed in relation to the learners need?"

4 Methodology

The distance education research has by far been experimental. This study also used structured questionnaires to have the opinion of the tutors and interview was made face to face contact. Besides the f2f access, the researcher was also able to communicate via mobile with the tutors of the different courses within the School. Tutors mobile number was gathered from the JSC Secretariat. Permission was sought from the Dean Open School for this research. 40 tutors from the ODL centers responded with interest in participating in the research. They were supplied questionnaire to participate. Background information was obtained from each participant and from the Secretariat data base. The same procedure of informing and gathering tutors' background information was carried out with the partner NGOs. There is similarities in the respondents' background can be attributed to the ODL system. Therefore, sample size was limited to 40 only. Personal experiences of the first writer have been reflected in this paper as he has been involved with the JSC project since its inception.

5 The researchers' role

This article has two writers. The first writer works as Coordinator of the JSC program and positioned himself an instructional designer who was seeking respondent's opinions and ideas about the different aspects of the SLMs. Respondents were described the objective of the research and the research intentions. Discussions pertained only to the research unless the participants seek to do otherwise. In any case, the researcher relented to listen to 'their other stories' up to a certain limit on the subject matter or the present teaching-learning process of the JSC program. The researcher was aware of the importance of further discussion related to the research questions. The second writer is the PhD supervisor of the first writer who provided guidance in every step and his authority on DE has been reflected in the research.

6 Discussion

JSC texts for Grade-7 & 8 were designed on the basis of the tutor's feedback on the Grade-6 focusing on having the high quality SLMs for the program. As a part of quality development activities, Institutional Design (ID) training for the SLM Development Team was conducted in 2008 by international experts using the Wiki-educator as platform and the Project Team suggested number of approaches such as peer correction, tutor correction and coding system to collect feedback, and subsequently sufficient feedback on grade-6 SLM was gathered from respective tutors and in some cases from learners.

The BOU-OS offers three pre-University programmes – Junior School Certificate (JSC) for Grade: 6-8, Secondary School Certificate (SSC) for Grade: 9-10 and Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) for Grade: 11-12. The School runs the JSC programme under a collaborative relationship with the

NGO coalition—Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE). One of the strengths of the University, as a whole, has been the great success of the programmes of the Open School. The success matches with the prime aim of the BOU in providing wide access to the community as a "university of the second chance" – it registers more learners than the rest of the Schools put together in the country. As such, Open School's programmes cover every remote corners of the country, and provide the highest revenue to the university exchequer. In addition, JSC is such a programme which also matches other objective of the University that is to cater to that section that are out of the formal system and highly disadvantaged. This section of people does not have the opportunity for the ICT facility; therefore, print has been very effective for their learning. Print is the main media of the programme delivery what is prepared to make it a source of 'active learning' where the JSC students are supposed to use the learning material to enhance his/her learning. BOU-OS uses an in-house style and the materials are highly structred. Contents are normally divided into:

- Units - broadly the material required to study for 5-6 hours;
- Lessons – sub-contents of the unit: materials required to study for 45 minutes.

Randomly selected modules of the courses are developmentally tested on Grade 6 students with appropriate experience and attainments (known as, try-out of the course materials). Courses for Grade 7 & 8 are revised in the light of student/tutor feedback collected through surveys and through extensive informal review process; they are also subject to mid-life review including that by the visiting external examiner from the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB). The development of new course in the School is a process of quality assurance by itself. Throughout the process of development and production, a peer group monitors, discusses and revives draft course materials, which is subjected to a process of collective criticism and development. This process is also applied to the academic content in a wider sense, the teaching points of the subject matter, and the examination and assessment policy linked to the central policy of the University as a whole.

The JSC tutors role particularly their social, administrative and academic roles have been very crucial for successful running of the programme. Their feedback in the SLM has been very useful for promoting overall quality of the programme. The JSC tutors are located in both rural and urban area, and each one is attached to one of the partner NGOs. The school academics have a responsibility for their staff development and supervision of their work, and for ensuring that tutorial and other support policy and strategy are implemented effectively by the JSC Secretariat. The Secretariat has devised a range of mechanism for identifying training needs, delivering staff development and evaluating the outcomes. They include:

- Open learning materials
- Self-assessment
- Peer support

It is necessary to mention that all tutors of the JSC program were trained by the OS faculty members on the above aspects. Therefore, they didn't experience any problem in providing feedback on the open learning materials. There appears to be a largely consistent pattern of bi-weekly face-to-face (f2f) tutorials for all courses for 20 weeks per year, presumably 20 per year per course. Special local practical activities in vocational courses are also held at the ODL centre. JSC tutorials are conducted in pattern of weekly f2f sessions as the learners are highly disadvantaged and that they need continuous weekly support to continue the programme. While dealing with the texts for grade-6, they tutors were well conversant with the problem what the learners faced. The feedback gathered through structured questionnaire had little effect on quality improvement and they did not seem to improve quality of the texts because those were very usual, though some of the appropriately given feedbacks through tutor correction encouraged quality writing. These cases will be discussed in the later part of this section. Feedback gathered on the following aspects:

- context with strong relationship with objectives

- content to attract the learner
- rationale to explain its importance and relevance
- in-house style to represent the type of activity
- time allocation
- instructions
- examples
- self-assessment

Table A: Tutors' Responses on JSC Texts Materials

Criteria Statement		Percentages of learners' opinion					Mean Responses
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	
n36	Structured material	0	2.8	11.1	36.1	50	4.33
n35	Well defined objectives	0	0	8.6	45.7	45.7	4.37
n37	Sufficient teaching notes	21.6	37.8	16.2	21.6	2.7	2.43
n37	Error free content	5.4	8.1	16.2	35.1	35.1	3.86
n36	Materials are locally adapted context	2.8	8.3	16.7	27.8	44.4	4.03
n37	Sufficient SAQ	2.7	2.7	13.5	51.4	29.7	4.03
n38	Motivate learners to read	2.6	10.5	7.9	42.1	36.8	4.00
n34	Large content size	5.9	17.6	14.7	29.4	32.4	3.65
n30	Texts supplemented by ICT materials	40.0	43.3	13.3	3.3	0	2.37
n38	Written in communicative language	5.3	23.7	15.3	26.9	28.9	3.50

The responses from tutors on the texts were very positive (Table A). The tutor's responses mean value is 4.33 that represent JSC materials are highly structured where teaching notes for the tutors are very low (mean value 2.43) which may hamper to perform their professional responsibilities. Folmer *et al* (1992) user-friendly written learning materials need to contain the right material in a logical and well presented form. They should be at the level of the learners and clear in their language and style. Several criteria have been developed to measure user friendliness. They look at simplicity of language, clarity of expression, logical sequence, page layout, pictures, style of writing and availability. Mean responses on all texts represent that JSC learning materials possess all these criteria; but selected case studies show different scenario.

Case Study 1
Uzzal Kumar Roy, Tutor, Parodorshi ODL Centre passed his opinion as under:
English text for Grade VI seems not appropriate to the learners because
- most of the contents are not culturally sensitive
- names and location used from English nation; should have been from Bangladesh context;
- pictorial presentation are not consistent with the subject matter;
- vocabulary used is not at par to the level six

All these problems were identified after the print of the book and handed some of the tutors to pass on their opinion. Based on the reviewer's (appointed from the NCTB) report and the tutor's judgment, the text was cancelled.

Mr. Roy, subsequently, passed his opinion for Grade VII English texts that the book is well fitted for the level as well as culturally and gender sensitive. He said, the text is highly appropriate for Grade VII.

Uzzal Kumar Roy, Tutor, Parodorshi ODL Centre

Case Study 2
Nayan Kumar Shen, Tutor, Patibilla Alor Pothe ODL Centre was asked to pass his comment on the quality of the Poultry and/or Livestock texts. He suggested more practical sessions for these

courses so that learners can have the opportunity for hand on exposure. He said, books are resourceful for learning vocational aspects of poultry and livestock.

Nayan Kumar Shen, Tutor, Patibilla Alor Pothe ODL Centre

Case Study 3
Auporna Rani Das, Tutor, Parodorshi ODL Centre passed her opinion on as under:

Social Science for Grade VII-
- Units or Blocks are not consistent to each other; some are large in size and some are scanty;
- Contents are not arranged properly as per the specific objectives; in some cases I found there are hazy pictures and irrelevant as well;
- Structure of the lessons is not similar to each other; some used five types of post-reading evaluation questions and some used one or two types of questions;
- Contents seem to be very voluminous;

This case is considered with high emphasis and subsequently the Grade VII text was prepared focusing on her comments. Mrs. Das appreciated the quality of Grade VII texts; she added that learners are very happy with the use of the book.

Case Study 4
Md. Rafiqul Islam, Tutor, Mongol Court ODL Centre passed his opinion as under:

Islam Education of Grade 6 has been well written in relation to sequences, linkages of the contents; style is different from School a text which seems to be very scientific to learn; Contents based on the life style of the gurus of Islam is very praiseworthy. Grade 7 and 8 has gradually been improved. Quality of the book maybe certified as number one.

Finally based on the case study reports; the SLMs for the grade-7 & 8 were developed and appeared more quality than that of the quality of the grade-6.

Conclusion and recommendations

Tutors and learners are the end users of the learning materials. The questions of quality and appropriateness still remain; that's why – every ODL program always draws attention to get the high quality text materials. JSC learning materials should be seen as a dynamic part of the learning process and not just something given out to learners with no follow-up or input from the teacher or facilitator (tutor). The principles of distance learning should be incorporated into their development and use, so that they are practical, problem oriented and relevant to the learners' situation and learning needs. A variety of learning materials should be used to encourage learning for knowledge, attitudes and skills. Written materials may not be the most appropriate, particularly for JSC program, other media should be considered and used. One aspect in the JSC texts is completely ignored that is the participatory approach to the use of learning materials. It will increase the attitude and performance skills learning. Continuous testing of any learning material is necessary to see whether it is valid and effective. JSC texts need to be tested and evaluated within the learners because clear, logical well-set-out materials encourage learning and will enhance the teaching program in the subsequent intake of the next intake. Learning materials are tools and as such are dependent upon their user. It is recommended that JSC texts will be modified interactive and participatory approach they can facilitate effective learning. JSC ID expert should bear in mind that when badly produced, and poorly used SLMs may be worse than useless, since they can confuse or misinform.

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