



English Course of Distance Learning Program: A Case Study of Parallel Education System

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Abstract

Textbooks/course materials are considered as the key component in teaching and learning any language. The present study aims at revealing the strengths and loopholes of the Intermediate English compulsory course of a distance learning program being offered in Pakistan. The study followed a qualitative approach and collected data through semi-structured interviews taken from teachers and pupils teaching the selected distance learning program in order to address the research questions. Overall findings of the study revealed that the textbooks used in the selected distance learning program are quite adequate to fulfil learners' learning needs and cover three language skills of reading, writing and listening but, speaking skills could not be improved because students being distant learners. Further findings showed that the textbook content comprises everyday conversation, communication skills, functional grammar and basic skills of the English language. Students suggested adding a positive point to their textbooks that are familiar with the basic grammar and function will help in improving reading and understanding literature. Teachers suggested that instructional practices need to be improved and asked for the provision of proper guidance from ELT experts as the textbooks are appropriate but need teacher guidebooks.

Key Words: English Course, Intermediate Level, Teaching Material, Students' and Teachers' Perceptions, Distance Learning Program, Pakistan

Introduction

This study aims to unfold the strengths and loopholes of the compulsory English course of a distance learning program being offered as a parallel education system in Pakistan. Textbooks are used as one of the essential tools for pedagogical and learning purposes to aid teachers and assist them in shaping their instructional

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practices. Similarly, course designers plan to design textbooks in a way that might assist students in learning in the best way. Textbooks/course material engage and develop a relationship between a course and learners' learning. On the other hand, learners enrolled in distant education/virtual programs are totally reliant on textbooks prescribed by the institution they are enrolled in. This is why the textbooks are required to be effective, meaningful, interesting and catering to learners' learning needs.

According to Richards (2005), textbooks play a vital role as a tool to learn a language where students receive knowledge and then practice it. He further maintains that textbooks help novice teachers to carry on their pedagogical practices. Unfortunately, the scenario of textbooks in Pakistan is dismal, as per Aftab (2012). She maintains that the reason is inadequate steps taken by curriculum wings and textbook developers.

The syllabus understudy is being prescribed for students enrolled as virtual students, and they learn through recorded audios, textbooks and submit assignments via mail. According to Jordan (1997), to design desirable, flawless English textbooks, thorough, constructive feedback is a prerequisite from both the stakeholders (English teachers and students) to create a balance between curriculum goals and learners' learning needs. This study, therefore, intends to analyze the suitability of the course books prescribed by intermediate (higher secondary) distance education program in Pakistan in terms of content and learners' learning needs.

The findings of this study may help and lead scholars to carry out further work on the useful impact of English coursebooks at other levels for distance learners. This will lead course designers to the thought of whether the units in the course are actually developing the basic English language skills and communication skills or not. This research will also assist syllabus/course designers who design English textbooks for various textbook boards in the country to add the material which is according to our learners' needs and demands.

At the intermediate level, students have to study English as a compulsory subject in at least two semesters. The selected textbooks are quite different from textbooks of regular textbook boards and comprise functional-based material in which students use the English language in a more communicative way. A number of researches have been conducted on English textbooks prescribed by textbook boards (specifically Punjab textbook board), but there is a dearth of research on the evaluation of distance learning programs offered as the parallel education system in Pakistan.

Literature Review

Distance Education System

The term 'distance education' was first used in the seventies. It is also referred to

as ‘Distance Learning’. According to Rashid (1992), his type of education system does not require a regular interaction between students and teachers. It also covers a lot of aspects of studies at almost all levels. It has a formal approach towards learning, and most of the interaction happens at a distance level. Moore (1973) posits that distance learning is “the family of instructional methods” where teaching/learning performance is accomplished and has been made easier through technological and other print devices. Wedemeyer (1971) maintains that this system has many varieties for teachers to teach in a conducive environment where students also feel comfortable to learn. In this way, the learning process does not stop with the development opportunities of self-directed learning. Lucas and Kinsman (2016) also claimed the importance and impact of distance learning.

Hulsman (1997) has described four rudimentary features of distance learning: 1) There is less connection between tutor and student due to place and time; 2) Some educational institutes have some courses and programs which demand distance education; 3) With the global demand, the use of technology in education has become the dire need to compete with the world; and 4) The synchronous and asynchronous ways of learning have allowed the stakeholders to adopt two-way communication process instead of playing a role as passive recipients of knowledge through broadcast signals.

Distance Education in Pakistan

There are many institutions that are providing distance learning to students all over Pakistan. Such distinctive institutions provide learning opportunities to many for the betterment of their future and promote literacy rate. Currently, many programs are being offered in such institutions at different levels. In these programs, students have the freedom of time and place to complete their degrees. Students work on their studies according to their own ease and comfort through different mediums like TV and radio, online tutoring, satellite transmissions, and different workshops and trainings. Distance learning in Pakistan has its vision to reach students’ home and their workplaces to give them the best education.

Textbooks

According to Hutchinson and Torres (1994):

The textbook is an almost universal element of teaching. Millions of copies are sold, every year and numerous aid projects have been set out to produce them in countries...no teaching-learning situation, it seems, is complete until it has its relevant textbook (p. 315).

Tomlinson (1996) defines a textbook as an aid to facilitate language learning. There are some other aspects that affect the designing of textbooks, such as contexts and instructional situations.

Students always need the motivation to learn a second language, and such instructional components and material always have a great impact. According to Sheldon (1988), textbooks are the source of advantageous learning for both the tutors and pupils, which also represent English language teaching (ELT).

Textbook Evaluation

Cunningsworth (1995) explains the textbook evaluation reasons and maintains that the textbooks always need to specify the strengths and drawbacks and context to adapt according to the desire and needs of their learners and its usefulness to determine teachers' professional growth and development. Alderson (1986) states that we evaluate something to establish a trademark to achieve something. According to Nunan (1988), to assemble and interpret any information by creating valuable judgments about coursebooks, evaluation is the key. The worth of course books can be seen through the examination process, and evaluation of its material is the only process (Tomlinson, 1996).

Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach and collected data through semi-structured interviews with four students and five teachers. Students have the choice to choose any semester among four semesters to study English books as their compulsory subject. The researcher chose students who already have studied English coursebooks so that the desired data could be collected. The study participants were interviewed at the place suggested by them, and each interview duration was 30-45 minutes.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and emerging themes were generated. Following aspects were included to analyze the textbooks according to the context:

- The content and language
- Basic attributes of the coursebook
- The practicality of the content
- All four language skills
- Any additional material and well-planned objectives

Findings

The findings are presented under the four emergent themes: Language skills enhancement (possibility of improvement of language skills); No chance to practice English language skills; Cultural specific (contextual) text types and content; Creative thinking skills; and improvement in layout and content.

Language skills Enhancement (Possibility of Improvement of Language Skills)

The findings revealed that the textbooks are very appropriate for the daily use of language. Students and teachers both responded that course material improved their reading and writing skills, communication skills and vocabulary.

One teacher responded that: *The books are lacking in terms of exercises and practice. The description of the theme or the unit is quite good, but the related exercises are not good enough* (T4). On being asked, “Do the exercises move from simple to complex?” the teacher responded: *No, the level is the same. It’s not simple to complex* (T4).

A student said: *I have improved my learning skills and improved my English a lot. There is a great difference between these books and other English course books, and these books are best because in these books, they have given so many minor things of English or you may say basic knowledge of English while Punjab textbook board books are quite heavy loaded* (S1).

Students find the textbooks easy to study and learn the language in a smooth manner. One of the teachers said:

They had this thing in their mind that if they add the units based on poems or plays etc., then it will not be different from the Textbook board setup because our board system includes all the literature-based units or contents (T4).

She further added:

Like when we have to meet someone to communicate, then we will not speak the poem obviously. We will not communicate with them with literary terms because obviously, when we will communicate, then we should have a grip on communication skills (T4).

The data reveals that the selected Textbooks are designed by keeping in mind students’ age group and context. The majority of the students who get enrolled in the distance Intermediate program are those who are coming after four to five years of gap in their studies, and they find these books less challenging. The content of these textbooks helps to inculcate knowledge of language grammar and its function in real life. One of the teachers stated: *I think that the textbook developers’ main objective was to develop student’s English communication skills so that they could be able to communicate with others in the English language* (T3)

No chance to practice English language skills

Teachers claimed that many of the students do not study regularly or give proper time because they only study to pass the exams. They study the books for writing their assignments also. Their progress can only be judged through these criteria where they have to submit assignments because they are distance learners. As it is distance learning, students do not have direct face to face interaction with their

instructors on a daily basis. There are so many topics that need proper guidance from the teacher. Teachers suggested that there must be some steps that should be taken by the university's authorities to have regular tutorials for students so that they could overcome their hesitation towards speaking in English. One teacher said:

Also, they have a fear of being laughed at by others that may be if they speak wrong English, they will get humiliated in front of others, so we just need to eradicate this fear, and we can only do this by setting up these tutorial classes for students so that they would come to attend the classes and would listen to the teacher. In this way, their listening skill will develop, and they will get an opportunity to speak in front of the audience (T1).

One of the teachers also responded in the same manner that making the classes compulsory will help students in understanding difficult concepts: *Classes should be arranged so that students can get a chance to practice English language skills (T3).*

One of the teachers claimed that some of the teachers do not take online lectures seriously. Those students who want clarification of their points do not get proper response from their assigned teachers. Teacher five responded:

Mostly the tutors on phone call say that 'I have already told you that you have to submit your assignment by this date' and are not much interested in whether a student is suffering from any difficulty. So I must say that the teachers should be active need to address students' learning problems (T5).

Cultural Specific (contextual) text Types and Content

The interview data shows that the content and text types of the selected English textbooks are culture-specific. Most of the teachers agree on this point that text type and contents are suitable and applicable in real-life scenarios. However, one teacher stated that *most students are working, which's why they are unable to give proper time to these books. They only study for the sake of their assessments (T2).* The teacher further added:

The reason is that they are not applying the knowledge in their daily life because they are taking it as their syllabus and trying to meet the exam criteria like ok... they say that they have to study it and pass the exam. In our society, there is a mindset that this is your syllabus for the exam, and you have to memorize it, sit the exam, pass, and you will be awarded a degree, so the goal is to get the degree. Students' main focus is not on learning. Although the textbook material is cultured specific students tend not to pay attention to that (T2).

The findings show that material in the books is very interesting, and both the major stakeholders, that is, students and teachers appreciate it. There are CDs available and provided by the university authorities for listening activities, but students do not use these. One of the students said:

Students do not take that much interest...although this syllabus is very helpful and interesting for students. If they do take it seriously, then they will develop language skills. But they don't give much importance and attention to the content. But it's again on the part of students. The university has given the opportunity to them to improve their listening skill through CDs in which they have added listening skills for distant learners. Secondly, these CDs are very helpful to understand the topics of the books (S3).

Inclusion of culture-specific material in the selected textbooks is highly appreciative and helping in a specific context. Students are enrolled from all over Pakistan, and this university is open to students from all cultural backgrounds. As there are different cultures in our country, the textbook designers have thoughtfully designed the English textbooks by keeping in mind all the major cultures. The text types are according to these cultures so that students do not feel alienated. In this way, they have tried to keep the balance between Pakistani culture and target language culture. Teacher two said: *The authors of the books have done a need analysis, and then they designed the books because I think the students need to learn the basics of language while in relevance to our local cultures (Teacher no. 5)*

One of the students stated that this cultural aspect is a good thing because, in this way, students do not feel alienated while learning a second language and added:

I don't think so that on the initial level, it's important to add the foreign culture in the textbooks because I think local culture creates harmony... if you start teaching language with the culture of that language from the very start, then students find it difficult (S4).

The students praised the addition of cultural texts. According to them, studying the English language in their own context and culture is very useful for them from a vocabulary learning point of view as well. One student said:

This is good in the sense that students will learn the English language and their own culture at the same time, and in this way, they can easily learn English while reading in their own context because they are familiar with their own culture better as compared to foreign culture (S2).

Another student responded: *The textbook developers have brought our culture in the content so that we could know the use of the English language in our culture, and it would be easy for us to understand the English language in our own context (S1).*

Creative Thinking Skills

The findings showed that the teachers think that although the material and exercises in the textbooks encourage creativity but not at a larger scale. However, according to one teacher: *Students only take this for granted because they only*

want to pass the examination and are unable to think creatively. Their only focus is to get a degree and pass the exams (T5).

Likewise, another teacher said:

Umm... I must say that the contents are much complex, and you may say too much thought-provoking for the students. If the student is a student in a real sense like he or she wants to learn out of that, then he or she can learn a lot, but if you just think that you are a student of a distance learning program and you just have to prepare assignments, and you will get good marks then it does not help them in developing their creative skills (T2)

Another teacher claimed that grammar-based textbooks do not promote creativity, and that is why these books have less margin for developing creative thinking skills:

Well, as far as creativity is concerned, I don't think so that the content of the books is promoting creativity because the books are purely grammatical, and I don't think that grammar induces creativity because grammar can help you to understand the language, but creative thinking is something else. In creative thinking, you are given some points, some ideas and then are asked to write something on it. But when you are being taught about the grammar and the basics of some language, it doesn't promote you to think creatively because if you know that ok I have to use such expression in such a situation then obviously you will be given that situation and you will do this (T1).

With this response, it can be seen that the exercises and activities encourage students to lower-order thinking level in Bloom's taxonomy. The same teacher responded further by saying:

There are many units of writing skills, but the exercises are not of that level where students have to write in a paragraph. There are usually things like how would you agree or disagree in a given situation and how would you make a request in that situation. In this, obviously, you would write two to three lines or sentences...so there will not be much creativity (T1).

From students' point of view, the books do help them in the creative thinking process. One student responded: *Like in these books, the writers have told us something and how we can use those concepts and make our own sentence etc. or if we want to tell others, then we can tell them through these things (S3).*

Another student responded:

No, it does not improve creative thinking. It also depends on the mental level of students. There are many students who are over age and those who are young as of 17 to 19. So those who are at the age of 17 to 19, if they work hard, can improve their creative thinking (S4).

Improvement in Layout and Content

The findings reveal that the participants feel that the quality of layout of pages

Needs improvement. One of the students said: *The pages should be colourful so that students feel motivated* (S1). One of the teachers said:

There is no focus on tenses in the grammar part because tenses are basic things to know, like if you don't know about the tenses, then how will you write or speak anything, because if you need to write anything in the English language, then one needs to know the tenses. So this is lacking in terms of grammar. Overall, the material is good (T4)

Teacher one responded: *I'm satisfied because there is enough material for students' understanding of the language, but it is our fault that we don't take much out of these books* (T2). Some of the teachers also claimed that the literature part should also be added more for vocabulary building and that the language is a bit difficult for some students who also need to be simpler.

One student said: *The conditional sentences must be added because, in these types of sentences, we always make mistakes* (S2). Student three stated his opinion that some current issues related topics should be part of the material for raising students' awareness of current issues. Similarly, a student said regarding course material development:

There are some students who do not understand the text regarding greeting or apologizing given in the books. They are hardly in 2 to 4 lines, so there must be a complete dialogue or a story with a proper context...it will be interesting (S4).

Conclusion

The study concludes that the Intermediate level English textbooks of the selected distance learning program are quite suitable for students belonging to different age groups and cultural backgrounds. Nevertheless, these textbooks are a bit challenging for those who start studying after a longer period of time. It is therefore recommended that material related to current issues, health tips must be added to the content. Secondly, the exercises and tasks should be developed in such a way as to help students practice from simple form to complex. Thirdly, exercises should be included to improve pronunciation, grammar, and a range of varied and interesting reading texts, and authentic reading material must be added to engage students. Fourthly, the six levels of Bloom's taxonomy must be incorporated to add creative writing exercises in the textbooks.

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