ASSESSING SELF-LEARNING MATERIALS FOR WRITING TASKS IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING MODE (ODL)

ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Introduction

Assessing writing tasks that are offered in distance mode particularly are more challenging because writing skill itself is a very challenging activity. Unlike the conventional classrooms, the Open Distance Learning (ODL) context falls short of effective interaction between tutors, peers, counselling sessions and materials. There is hardly any literature available in the area of the assessing Self-Learning Mode (SLM) oriented writing tasks. Subsequently, assessment of writing tasks suffers since the ODL format shows lack of strategies to assess the student performance by way of appropriately designed writing tasks. Assessment of SLM in distance mode is still deprived of proper assessment strategies and henceforth the need for assessing SLM based writing task becomes a significant strategy for producing effective writing outcomes.

Till date, very little has been said and done for assessment of writing skills in ODL context. There is a need to improve the assessment method and related strategies in order to enhance the learners’ performances. Assessment of writing task in ODL is relatively a new topic and not many studies have been conducted in this area.

The study focuses on the ground reality that the effectiveness of writing tasks instruction in conventional classroom poses immense challenges and complexities. This complexity of task instruction invites serious consideration for task assessment in the ODL format. There is a need to update the assessment of the SLM based writing tasks design and course delivery strategies. The effectiveness of writing skill in formal classroom is still not very promising because of various constraints and complexities. However, the teaching of writing in anytime space and time in distance mode does not materialize as easily as it can be hypothesized on the basis of assessing writing through one-time assignments. Good and bad assignments of students are the reflection of materials students interact with. Assessing the written assignments will lead to re-assessment of writing tasks designed for SLM and therefore there is a constant need to update and assess SLM. Keeping in mind these considerations, the study takes up the following research questions:
Research Questions

1. What are the issues related to the assessment of Self-learning materials for writing tasks in ODL mode?
2. What is the impact of tutor led assignments on assessing writing tasks in ODL mode?
3. How far writing tasks can be modified to suit the concerns of assessing SLM in ODL mode?

Hypothesis of the study

1. Writing tasks are not planned for ODL learners.
2. Designing a writing task will improve the learner’s performance in writing in ODL.
3. Re-assessment of writing tasks will lead to the better learning outcomes in ODL mode.

Research Methodology

The methodology adopted for the research study is quantitative, qualitative and interpretative in nature. The study takes into account raters’ assessment of writing task, direct writing samples and findings based on survey questionnaire.

Samples

The total number of samples selected for the study is 91. Out of which, 60 written assignment samples are drawn from different batches of BCA (FEG-02) and MCA (MS-015) of IGNOU Aligarh study center in order to assess the performance of ODL learners on writing tasks. A questionnaire was conducted on a separate group of 31 students enrolled in the same courses during the academic year 2013.

Method

In the present study, assessment of SLM is delimited to two courses offered by IGNOU i.e. BCA *Foundation course in English (FEG-02)* and MCA *Skills needed at workplace (MCS-015)*. Tasks based on writing skills are the primary consideration for picking up these two courses. For the assessment of tutor-marked writing assignment in accordance with SLM criteria, writing assessment rubric has been developed and the raters are the tutors of IGNOU who have taught these courses and were familiar with the target groups of the study.
Instruments

Rubric: An analytical rubric for assessment of writing task was designed to assess the students’ writing assignments and units of SLM for the same course. It described the quality of writing tasks in SLM and level of student’s performance in each of the scoring category by separating and weighing the individual on four components: writing tasks objectives and contents, organization of unit (example, logical arrangement of ideas, cohesion, etc.) language use and vocabulary by assigning the numerical values (see chapter 5 for rubric design).

Survey: The questionnaire selected for the research study was a close ended questionnaire. It consisted of four sections, designed to identify the ODL students’ needs, problems and difficulties regarding writing assignments, counselling sessions and rating the writing tasks given in their syllabus from relevant to extremely irrelevant and from easy to most difficult writing task. The questionnaire is divided into four sections (see chapter 5 for the design of questionnaire).

Data Interpretation and Analysis

For the purpose of assessment of writing task in Self-learning materials (SLM) the mean scores of two raters were used with the results tabulated and analysed. The scores of raters on analytical scoring were calculated to the check the reliability through mean. The scores of the raters were reliable and it proved that ODL learners writing skills are not very well developed. The survey questionnaire was also conducted to generalise findings on difficulties of ODL learners with respect to their writing performance and tutor rating.

Finding of the study

The study investigated the assessment of writing tasks in SLM to cater the writing needs of ODL learners. The most important finding is related to the raters’ assessment of the written samples (paragraph writing and letter of complaint) of ODL learners on four criteria (objectives and contents of writing tasks, organization, language use and vocabulary). The raters’ mean score of all the four criteria was found to be reliable and it was found that ODL learners are very poor in writing skills. It was found that ODL learners copy each other assignments and plagiarise too.
According to the survey findings, most of the learners reported that assignments are related to the course but on the other hand, they also reported that assignments are very difficult to comprehend. Therefore, they adopt malpractices in writing assignments. ODL learners also reported that they need more counselling sessions and tutor’s attention in solving their problems related to the course and assignments.

MCA (MCS-105) learners reported job application as the most relevant writing task followed by curriculum vitae and letter of appointment, as these three tasks are frequently used genres in writing and are related to their professional development. They also reported writing reports, writing memo and negotiating letters as the most difficult writing tasks.

The BCA (FEG-02) learners reported writing paragraph as the most relevant writing tasks followed by report writing and writing composition. They also reported summary writing as the most difficult writing tasks followed by report writing and note taking.

The data highlighted the difficulties in learning to write in addition to the learner’s lack of interest, awareness and motivation in writing as well as lack of opportunities of practice in writing. The writing tasks need modifications to suit the concerns of ODL learner. Assessing the quality of written assignments and tasks can be an important way to assess the quality of SLM. If effective assessment strategies are applied to any distance writing course than it could provide benefits to the course and learners.

**Recommendations**

1. There is a need to design special writing tasks according to the needs of ODL learners.

2. SLM needs modification for simpler writing tasks following the concept of TBLT methodology that will give novice ODL learners practice of writing in different stages leading to improvement in low ability of writing skill.

3. SLM also need to be incorporated with proper self-assessment criteria for learners, so that they can assess their progress and can perform better in assignments without cheating/ copying each other work.

4. The design of the writing task actually should conform to the test measures.
5. Positive washback effect of assessment of writing task must find significant space in ODL curriculum and SLM (Weigle, 2002).

In-service teacher training at distance

1. Mostly training programs and seminars are hypothetical and they are quite distanced from the learner; there is a need for regular follow-up and training programs.
2. Teachers in conventional mode too need training to facilitate the regular learning and they can get this training through ODL mode and vice versa.
3. Trainers also need training in terms of catering to the need of teachers where writing is an area which requires more attention.
4. In training programs teacher must be given training in almost all the areas of writing so that they can overcome with the fear of writing.
5. While designing the SLM, tutor/teacher/instructor need to be put at the centre of decision making process.
6. There should be effective communication between learner and the tutor through various configurations available through multimedia.
7. Training should also be given to teachers in terms of given feedbacks on writing anticipating their problems (Verma, 2008)

Implications for Monitoring Writing and assessment procedures

To sum up, the training procedures related to the writing task-assessments must be able to answer the following questions:

1. How effective is the writing task? Does it need revision?
2. Are there enough writing activities or remedial writing activities?
3. What strategies can be introduced to make students writing effective?
4. How effective is the assessment system? Does it require any change?
5. Do the writing activities match the learning outcomes?
6. How effective is the tutor support system? Does it require any change?
7. Is there enough scope of feedback on the written assignments in ODL mode?
8. How effective are the training procedures for course writers and tutorial system?
9. Is there any mechanism to provide different topics/task to different learners?
10. Is there any training given to tutors to check malpractices in ODL system while assessing the writing tasks?

11. How counselling sessions can be used to generate better and effective writing skills?

12. How tutors can introduce the assessment of writing tasks on the basis of differentiating learning and varied writing abilities?

Significance of the study

The research study takes into consideration the writing difficulties and problems of students who are studying in distance mode. Not much research has been done in the area of writing practices in ODL mode.

The study is especially significant in the context of assessing writing tasks design to tailored to the needs of ODL learners since these learners consider themselves inferior to students of formal mode.

The study has its pedagogical implications for distance tutors, students as well as material writer and designers. The study is an attempt to make writing tasks more flexible, comprehensible and accessible in SLM mode and obviously this has wider educational implications as well. Assignments help in bridging distance between the teachers and the students. If properly designed, writing assignments can be considered as an effective way of communication and can prove more effective than the personal contact programs (Chander, 1991). Satyanarayana &Sesharatnam (1992) say that assignments are an important way in obtaining feedback from tutor and establish the contact between the two.

SLM developers could also derive benefits from this study. They can develop the design of writing tasks that could be inbuilt into SLM. The study will be benefit both distance learners and distance teaching and design of writing tasks will provide greater opportunities to distance learners to become better writer as they need to survive professionally in the competing world.

Limitations of the study

1. The assignment sheets collected for assessment are from different years of different batches because it was not possible to test the effectiveness of
designed tasks on the same group of which the assignments have been collected.

2. Only two courses of IGNOU, FEG- 102 (BCA) and MCS-16 (MCA) are taken for assessment of writing tasks as it is not possible to assess the entire courses that are operated in IGNOU and the regional center of Aligarh (IGNOU) has been taken for locale of the study.

3. The sample for questionnaire consisted of a fairly small group. It is difficult to collect data because students are not available. The time for the contact program is very limited just for two to six days and not many students turned up for counseling sessions.

4. Therefore, the questionnaire is conducted on different batches and writing assignments are collected from different batches.

Organization of the study

The research study consists of five chapters which are as follows:

Chapter 1: The Statement of Intent

The purpose of this chapter is to gives an outline of the proposed research study and discusses the background, theoretical framework, context of the study, rationale and problems to be investigated in the light of topic, hypothesis, objectives of study, research methodology, significance of the study, limitations and organization of the study.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature on Tasks-based language teaching: Researches in Second language writing

This chapter provides the theoretical background to task-based language teaching, with specific reference to second language writing. The discussion is further carried on task, approaches to tasks based language and its methodology for implementing in classroom. Finally, the chapter will have a focus on the insights gained from the Task-based Language Teaching and writing task features so that it informs the ODL writing task assessment.
Chapter 3: Review of Literature on Open and Distance Learning mode (ODL): An overview of Strategies of course delivery Self Learning Materials (SLM)

This chapter briefly summarizes the ODL teaching and learning processes of various distance teaching universities/ open universities in the world, drawing insights from distance teaching universities. The chapter discussed design and development of SLM and various strategies of course delivery.

Chapter 4: Review of literature on Assessing Writing in Formal and ODL mode

This chapter reviews assessing writing in formal and ODL mode and assessment of different tasks types, testing measures, benchmarks and assessment in ODL.

Chapter 5: Research Methodology: Results and Discussions

This chapter is based on research methodology. It describes the research design leading to results and discussions. It includes discussion of methods, samples, and procedures of data collection. The discussion reports important findings and implications of the study.

Chapter 6: Conclusion: Suggestions and Recommendations.

Notes
References
Appendices