CHAPTER 4

Methodology and Research Procedures

4.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out by explaining the framework of the present study at the conceptual and operational level. Then it presents the research questions that give directions to this study. This is followed by a section on other methodological information regarding subjects, data collection instruments, research procedures and challenges faced during the collection of the data. The chapter also presents the operational definitions of terms, which are expected to help clarify the scope of the definitions of terms used in this study.

4.2 The nature of the research

Since very little literature is available in the chosen area of research that might have provided a benchmark or framework on which to peg this study, this study begins as an exploratory study. At the conceptual level, the research study follows a synthetic\(^1\) approach with a heuristic\(^2\) objective. As a synthetic study, it follows an inclusive pathway, bringing under its ambit a variety of factors for analysis, without pitting one factor against another. For example, the programmes under consideration have several components like course materials, contact programmes, assignments and other learner support services, which have been analysed in terms of efficacy. Factors like perceptions of stakeholders and amount and quality of interaction have also been considered, as they help throw light on the effectiveness of each

\(^1\) Synthetic approach refers to an approach that allows the researcher ‘to view the separate parts as a coherent whole’. (Seliger and Shohamy, 1989:27)

\(^2\) Research with a heuristic objective may have no complete theories or models for guidance or for stimulation of research questions. It enables the researcher ‘to discover patterns, behaviors, explanations, and to form questions or actual hypotheses for further research’. (Seliger and Shohamy, 1989:30)
of these components. All these relevant factors have been brought within the scope of the study as far as possible, and the phenomena have been studied within a holistic perspective.

The study also sets a heuristic objective for analysis. As discussed in the previous chapter, the ELT programmes are offered in diverse contexts and in different settings within the selected institutions. The study tries to explore and describe the phenomena by discovering possible patterns or relationships among factors relating to the effectiveness of the programmes in the contexts of the selected programmes of study. It does not aim to formulate and test any hypothesis, and rather attempts to explore the academic operations heuristically. In other words, the research study is open to modification of preconceptions and of research plans in the course of the research, if needed.

At the operational level, therefore, the research design demands a low degree of control and manipulation of the research context. The scope of the research has been kept broad, because controlling the variables might allow a lopsided rather than robust analysis of programme efficacy at the academic level. The research study operates on the assumption that any or all of the variables under study may be significant markers of effectiveness. Hence the study focuses on the process of identifying and describing the possible factors relating to the effectiveness within the specific research context. Moreover, by not controlling the variables, the research study has allowed an unbiased perspective from the informants, who have been encouraged to use their personal experience to express their perceptions of the effectiveness of the programmes. Because of the synthetic and heuristic nature of the research as discussed above, the study also allows for a degree of subjective judgement and interpretation in identifying the factors that determine or showcase effectiveness. In this study, therefore, the researcher has also relied on her own judgement and interpretation to identify the most relevant markers of effectiveness.
In short, the study describes the phenomena relating to effective course delivery of the programmes by trying to discover relations between the variables in existing practices in distance ELT pedagogy programmes. Since the field is little studied, this research study attempts to explore possible markers of the effectiveness of course delivery rather than making conclusive remarks on the most or least effective programmes. The scope of research has been kept broad intentionally, since this allows the researcher to present a holistic picture of distance English language teacher education in India. However, for a systematic investigation of the topic, five research questions have been formulated to guide the study.

4.3 The research questions

The study sets out by formulating guiding questions focussing on aspects of the programmes that were felt would indicate effectiveness of course delivery in terms of the broad components of the theoretical framework discussed above. Five questions were formulated for the study:

i. Why do course takers choose to study ELT through distance mode?

ii. How far and in what ways do the course materials contribute to self-learning?

iii. How far do the assignments engage the learners in self-learning and reflection?

iv. How effective are the contact and counselling programme in fulfilling learning objectives?

v. What are the perceptions of the stakeholders (learners, counsellors/teachers, course material writers and administrators) towards the effectiveness of the programme?

However, in the process of the research, it was felt that there was a need for revision of the questions. It was seen that the perceptions of the stakeholders were embedded in the other research questions. So the fifth question relating to stakeholder perceptions was replaced by a
question relating to modes of instruction which is also a pertinent issue in any distance education programme. The revised list of research questions is as follows:

i. Why do course takers choose to study ELT through distance mode?

ii. How far and in what ways do the course materials promote self-learning?

iii. How far do the assignments engage the learners in self-learning and reflection?

iv. How effective are the contact and counselling programme in fulfilling learners' needs?

v. What kind of interaction do the other modes of instruction promote in the selected programmes?

In the rest of the sections the study will describe in detail the methodology undertaken, beginning with a brief description of the subjects of the study.

4.4 The subjects of study

Four groups of stakeholders of the selected programmes – the learners, teachers, course writers and administrators – were considered as subjects for the research study. However, the fourth group of stakeholders – the administrators (directors, coordinators, etc.) had to be later excluded, mainly because they were preoccupied with administrative work, and were reluctant to answer the queries. However, many of them helped the researcher to reach to the other stakeholders who were directly related to the selected programmes. For the purpose of this research study, therefore, responses have only been collected from the other three groups of stakeholders, i.e. learners, counsellors and course writers.

Setting a minimum number of stakeholders per group may have been relevant for purposes of statistical analysis, but this study being conducted on distance programmes, such a number could not be determined at the beginning of the research. Unlike face to face courses where a minimum attendance is compulsory, the vast numbers of distance programme participants enrolled for a programme may be unlikely to attend a contact and counselling programme,
which is the most viable place for a researcher to meet and interact with them. In this study, therefore, the researcher has not set a minimum number of subjects to study; instead, she has tried to collect responses from as many subjects as possible, both through interaction with them during the contact programmes and through personal contact by telephone and email.

The next section discusses the methods that the researcher used to collect data from the subjects as well as from other sources of the selected programmes.

4.5 The data collection methods

The aspects on which data has been collected are based on criteria listed on the basis of two documents that are accepted worldwide as standard resources for quality assessment and assurance tools in distance education programmes to assess effectiveness of programme delivery through distance mode. These two documents are *Quality Assurance Toolkit for Distance Higher Education Institutions and Programmes* prepared by the Commonwealth of Learning in partnership with Sri Lankan Ministry of Higher Education and UNESCO (2009) and *Quality Indicators for Teacher Education* prepared by the Commonwealth of Learning in collaboration with NAAC (2007). The details of these documents have already been discussed in Chapter 2 (Section 2.4.2).

The documents deal with both academic and non-academic aspects (managerial, administrative, etc) while assessing a programme for quality assurance. As the focus of this study is on academic or pedagogic aspects, only those criteria in these documents that are the most relevant indicators of pedagogical effectiveness have been selected for this study. A modified list of criteria and the sources from which data for the criteria would need to be collected was prepared (Document enclosed in Appendix A on page 199).

In order to collect data on the identified issues on the course delivery, four kinds of data collection procedures were used. They include three instruments involving personal contact -
questionnaires, interviews and informal conversations, and one objective procedure: document analysis. The following is a brief description of each procedure used in this study.

i) Questionnaires

For this research study, three sets of questionnaires were designed – one each for learners, teachers/counsellors and course writers. Issues included in this new document have been incorporated in the questionnaires to collect information from the field. Below is a brief description of the questionnaires:

a) Student questionnaire: The student questionnaire included 50 questions in all. The first section includes the respondent’s profile, after which the questionnaire is divided into seven sections, each pertaining to seven different aspects. These aspects are: general issues (10 questions), course materials (14 questions), assignments (4 questions), contact sessions (12 questions), audio-video materials (2 questions), practicum component (4 questions), and general feedback on programme (4 questions).

b) Teacher questionnaire: The teacher questionnaire included 23 questions in all. The questions were designed to elicit perspectives on course materials, contact programmes, assignments, professional development and their general comment on the programme.

c) Course writer questionnaire: This questionnaire contained 15 questions. The course writers were asked about guidelines for writing the self-instructional materials, the templates for the modules/units/lessons, their opinion on the relevant points to remember while writing for distance learners (personal tone, contextualization, etc.), their experience of the process of material development, and the contribution of this experience to their professional development.
The questionnaires included close-ended Yes/No questions, multiple choice questions and rating scales. Close-ended questions were used for two reasons – first, the questionnaire sought to collect comprehensive information on the various components of the programme, and it would be both time consuming and cumbersome for respondents to respond to all items in detail. Secondly, information collected through close-ended questions are much easier to collate and analyse than that gathered through open-ended type items (Nunan 1992: 143). However, to allow respondents to add additional information or explanation where needed, space was provided after most questions in the questionnaire.

ii. Interview

Learners and teachers were interviewed through email to collect information about their perceptions regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the programmes. It was expected that this would help the researcher to identify the factors which were perceived by the stakeholders as important for effectiveness of course delivery.

iii. Informal conversation

Informal conversations have also been used as tools to elicit data about effectiveness. Throughout the fieldwork, the researcher sought to gather insights from the stakeholders through informal conversations on several issues related to the functioning of the programmes such as learner support, administrative support, etc. These conversations did not follow a fixed pattern or line of questioning; they were allowed to take any direction, guided by the responses of the subjects. The researcher allowed this latitude to avoid the phenomenon referred to as ‘researcher bias’, where the researcher’s line of questioning may have an inherent goal or focus, and merely lead to validation or negation of pre-determined conclusions. By allowing the conversation to be open ended, the researcher felt she might be able to discover new forms, descriptions or understanding of ‘effectiveness’.
iv. Document analysis

Two types of document analysis were done to collect information about course delivery from relevant documents. They are:

**Materials evaluation:** The study materials in all forms (print/non-print) for each selected programme have been collected. The materials have been studied in terms of both the content and presentation of the materials and their relative degree of success in achieving effectiveness of delivery.

**Record reviews:** Other kinds of data pertaining to stakeholders’ perceptions of the effectiveness with which the academic content of the programme has been delivered were also studied as part of the methodological procedures. Student handbooks, letters, office notifications and teachers’ comments were among the records consulted and analysed as data. The contents of such documents were used to work out the factors contributing to effectiveness, and their connections to each other, if any.

4.6 Trying out the research instruments

Before using the questionnaires and other data elicitation instruments on all the subjects, it is customary for researchers to test the reliability and validity of their instruments by conducting a pilot study on one group of subjects. When this is not possible, the instruments can be suitably modified after using them on the first group of subjects (also referred to as ‘real’ subjects), such that a more appropriate (reliable and valid) set of data collection procedures and instruments can be evolved and used on the remaining subjects. As Seliger and Shohamy (1989:195) state,

‘When it is not possible to administer a pilot, the researcher should compute reliability and validity after the instrument has been used in the real study and make necessary adjustments, such as deleting certain items, before the data of the whole study is analyzed. This will help ensure that the data analysis is based only on reliable and valid data.’
Using this line of reasoning, the researcher used the questionnaires on the subjects in Netaji Subhas Open University, and subsequently incorporated the following revisions in the questionnaires:

a. More respondent-friendly format: The questionnaires were modified to make them more respondent-friendly, mostly by defining some of the key terms that were used to understand efficacy. For example, after collecting responses during first field work, the researcher realised that some terms such as practicum or academic calendar needed to be defined for the respondents. In the modified questionnaire, definitions of such terms were added as footnotes.

b. A few items were added or extended to meet contextual demands. The following are two such examples.

- Originally, the question about academic calendar (Question No 4, Learners’ questionnaire) was formulated as ‘How many activities are followed according to the academic calendar?’ After the questionnaire was administered to a group of subjects at NSOU, the researcher realised that many learners were not aware of any academic calendar. So the question was modified: it was divided into two parts, and included an operational definition of the term ‘academic calendar’.
  
  i. Is/Was the academic calendar (where activities throughout the year are scheduled) available to you?

  ii. If yes, how many activities are/were followed according to the academic calendar?

     a) All

     b) Some

     c) None
• The question about flexibility regarding choice of courses (Q. No. 8, Learners’ questionnaire) was originally designed as ‘Did you have the liberty to choose optional courses/papers yourself?’ It was later modified considering the fact that many learners were already aware of the provision of optional papers. The question was modified as

i. Were there any optional courses/papers in your programme?

ii. If yes, did you have the liberty to choose optional courses/papers yourself?

c. Some questions were deleted to avoid redundancy or replaced with different questions to elicit better responses from the stakeholders. For example, the question on ICT (question no. 9, Learners’ questionnaire) was originally followed by another question, i.e. ‘Do you have access to ICT?’ This part was later deleted since learners had been already asked about their access to computers and Internet in the profile page at the very beginning.

d. It was found that the same activity or component was termed in a different way in the different programmes. For example, the face-to-face sessions in a distance programme are termed contact and counselling programme in the EFLU programmes and personal contact programme (PCP) in NSOU. The researcher realised that using the term contact and counselling with learners in Netaji Subhas Open University to refer to face to face contact led to confusion when the questionnaire was administered to NSOU participants. So, before administering the questionnaire among the rest of the subjects, such terms were modified according to the nomenclature used by the particular institution.

e. One way of collecting information from subjects, according to the original methodological plan, was telephonic interviews. But when such interviews were
conducted with the first group of respondents – those from NSOU, it was found that this was not a convenient way to collect information both in terms of time management and telephone network connectivity. So further correspondence with subjects for additional data collection and verification was done with the help of e-mail addresses collected through the questionnaires.

The following section describes in detail the procedure that the researcher followed while collecting data from the field.

4.7 Data Collection Procedures

After finding out the schedules of the contact programmes from the home websites of the selected institutions, the researcher visited the institutions during the contact programmes. A preliminary survey revealed that this would be the most convenient period for meeting the stakeholders, especially the learners, who are an integral source of information for the research.

After arriving at the institutions, the researcher followed the steps described below, altering the steps according to the need of the context.

The first step was identifying and setting up an appointment with the appropriate authority/person from whom the researcher needed to seek permission for meeting programme participants.

The next step was to obtain permission to collect data from the participants through questionnaires, interviews and personal conversations, and also collect study materials, examination question papers and assignments.

The third step involved visiting the office of the department/unit concerned to find out the timings of the contact classes so that a suitable time could be arranged to administer questionnaires to participants and teachers.
The following step involved finding out the most suitable way of administering questionnaires. While administering questionnaires among learners and counsellors, the researcher had to adopt one of the three ways depending on their convenience: (i) giving out the questionnaire to the respondent and waiting till he/she completed filling it and submitted it, (ii) giving out the questionnaire and collecting it on another date and/or place, and (iii) collecting email address and sending the questionnaire via email. For this purpose, the questionnaires were made available in three formats – print, soft copies and Google forms. While in most cases, the printed questionnaires have been used, the online Google forms of questionnaires were used for the PGDELT programme of Osmania University and the PGCTE programme of EFLU.

A brief discussion of the challenges faced during data collection follows in the next section.

4.8 Challenges in data collection

The greatest challenge of the research work has emerged from the fact that the programmes under consideration are offered by different institutions in different geographical locations, exhibiting very different academic cultures and contextual differences. There were differences in terms of functioning, course delivery, attitude of people and distance. Because of this, the researcher had to make a fresh start at each new institution she visited.

The challenges ranged from finding out the right person to seek permission to gather data, to finding out the opportune moment to communicate with the stakeholders.

a) Establishing initial contact

Identifying the appropriate authority or person in each institution was a time-consuming task because each institution had different administrative mechanisms. For example, the designations of the officer for such permissions in every institution were different; in one
case it was the Dean, in another it was the Director of the distance education unit, and in a third institution the designated authority was the Registrar.

b) Getting through rigorous formalities

The researcher realised that the letter of introduction and request for data that she had carried from her host university was not enough for the purpose. Besides seeking permission to meet the stakeholders to collect data, separate approval was required to collect the study materials, because this aspect was handled by another department or office. The different policies in different institutions thus created challenges in data collection. While PSTU, OU and NSOU allowed the researcher to collect study materials without following a rigorous permission procedure, EFLU refused to give away study material due to copyright issues and policy restrictions. However these two institutions allowed the researcher to make photocopies of the relevant materials. Quite a lot of time had to be spent in these formalities.

c) Limited accessibility to stakeholders

In most cases, the schedule of the contact programme was very tight and the researcher could communicate with the students through informal conversations and administration of questionnaires only during the break.

In non-residential contact programmes like that in the PSTU, learners were often in a hurry to leave the institutions as soon as they finished with the classes, because they were from distant places or had other preoccupations. Even in the residential contact programmes like those in EFLU, the schedule was so tight that in most cases, the learners had hardly time for doing anything more than getting introduced and sharing the email addresses. Yet the researcher could manage to have informal conversation with a few learners in the evening in hostels. So finding out an opportune time to administer the questionnaire was a real challenge.
Meeting or communicating to the course writers was also another challenge. Because some of them are no longer involved with the programmes and some are senior people who are reluctant to participate in the study. So only a few responses from the course writers could be collected.

d) Persuading stakeholders to participate in the study

Another challenge was to convince the people concerned to give out information to the researcher who is an outsider in the institution. Almost every time, the researcher had to explain her research plan in detail to reassure that the study was for purely academic purpose. In one of the programmes, the researcher faced a direct question from the learners asking what benefit they would get from responding to the questionnaire. The researcher explained the importance of their responses as they directly contribute to study about the effectiveness of the programmes. The researcher felt that some of the teachers and course writers were a little apprehensive about giving critical comments. However, most of them took the researcher into confidence and requested the researcher to keep their responses strictly anonymous before giving a critical comment.

e) Poor response to online questionnaires

Due to a very tight schedule, the EFLU learners could manage to give only their email addresses and their consent to participate in the study when the researcher met them physically. However, the collection of questionnaire data through Google forms was not very successful. Out of the four respondents in Osmania University to whom the online questionnaire had been sent, the researcher has received three of them back, that too in three months. In the PGCTE EFLU programme, the researcher had sent Google form questionnaires to 76 learners. She received responses from only 28 learners in two months, that too after repeated reminders.
Like the technical (both academic and administrative) terms used by different institutions offering distance ELT programmes which are unique to the institutions, there are some terms which can have different connotations in deliberations on distance language teacher education. In the last section of this chapter, therefore, the operational definitions of such technical terms are provided, so that the discussion in the following chapters is free of confusion or misinterpretation.

4.9 Data analysis: the proposed theoretical framework

As discussed in Chapter 2 (Section 2.6), Wallace’s Reflective Model (1991) has been used for designing a framework to analyze data in the present study. In the distance education context, a pedagogically effective distance English language teaching programme is one that utilizes its course delivery mechanisms to compensate for the reduced amount of human interaction (e.g. face-to-face contact between teachers and learners) and still enable learners achieve professional development. The initial investigation in the profile of the selected programmes showed that the programmes offer courses through delivery mechanisms like print materials, contact programmes, assignments, etc. The key elements of Wallace’s Reflective model (as discussed on page in Section 2.6 in Chapter 2 above) - received and experiential knowledge - have been used in the modified framework to examine course delivery mechanisms specific to distance education, such as print materials, contact programmes, assignments and the practicum component. The present study thus uses a modified framework (shown below) to analyze the determinants of efficacy in terms of how the programme has facilitated the reflective cycle of received knowledge and experiential knowledge in the context of practice. The framework also tries to capture the ways in which the reciprocal relationship between received and experiential knowledge leads to a reflective cycle.
In the light of the framework and criteria used to study effectiveness of course delivery in the selected programmes of study, several operational terms have been used. The following section defines these terms in the context of this study.

4.10 Some operational terms defined

This section defines the technical terms used in the context of the present study. These terms might have different implications or meanings in other contexts. For purposes of this research work, however, the following definitions will be used to describe the phenomena:

**Contact programmes**: Face-to-face sessions conducted at some point of a programme which might or might not be compulsory for learners to attend.

**Counsellors/teachers**: People who are engaged in teaching/counselling in a distance programme.

**Course delivery**: How the courses are delivered through different interventions like course materials, contact programmes, and assignments.

**Courses**: Different components/papers of a programme.
**Distance education:** For the purpose of this study, distance education has not been distinguished from open or correspondence education. These terms have been used interchangeably in this context.

**Dual-mode institution:** An institution that offers both regular/conventional and distance programmes.

**Learners:** The teachers or aspiring teachers who join the programmes as students or trainee teachers

**Programmes:** A package of courses leading to a certificate of a degree or diploma.

**Study materials:** The printed or other forms of materials that are used for delivering courses to distance learners.

**Teacher training/education/development:** This study does not distinguish between teacher training and teacher education or development. By teacher training/education/development, it intends to talk about all the pre-service and/or in-service programmes leading to a postgraduate degree or diploma.

### 4.11 Conclusion

This chapter discusses the methodology that has been followed while conducting the study. It explains how the study is synthetic in nature and holds a heuristic objective, and how the study refrains from controlling or manipulating factors relating to the effectiveness of the selected programmes. It then talks about the formulation of the research questions and their revision as demanded by the context. The next section discusses the selection of subjects and also justifies the exclusion of some subjects from the study. Then the chapter discusses the data collections instruments like questionnaires, record reviews, materials evaluation, informal interviews, etc. and talks about modification of some instruments following trial. A discussion on the data collection procedures follows this section. Then it discusses the kinds
of challenges that the researcher has faced while collecting the data. Finally, the chapter has presented the theoretical framework that has been used for analyzing data in this study, and also defined some terms as they have been operationalized in the study, which will clarify their use in the rest of the thesis. In the following chapters, the findings of data in the selected contexts will be discussed and analysed.