Chapter 1

The Context

1.1 Introduction

This chapter deals with a detailed introduction to the context of the present study. The present study is based on a critical appraisal of the materials used in the English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) programme conducted by the OUSL. The chapter presents a detailed background to the study which includes the status of Distance Education (DE) in Sri Lanka, the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) and the study system and the goals of OUSL. Moreover, the EGAP programme is discussed in detail in this chapter which includes the course materials, course structure and content, the scheme of assessment, the objectives, underlying assumptions strengths and weaknesses of the EGAP programme. Further, The chapter presents the rationale for the study, research questions, objectives of the research, assumptions of the main study, research methodology in brief and the design of the thesis.

1.2 Background to the study

This research was conducted with the objective of evaluating the suitability and efficacy of course materials used in the EGAP programme in the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL). Course material is the central factor which binds and links a process of an academic course. The role of the course materials become even more significant, unique and challenging in the context of Distance Education (DE) and language learning. The role and function of learning materials in DE is defined by the mode of delivery and as such, the materials are designed to perform the role of a 'teacher'. Hence, the instruction in learning materials needs to be self-instructional to promote self-learning among the learners. Therefore, the distance learning materials are defined as self-instructional materials (SIM). As such, one main dimension of the research is exploring the role of EGAP materials as SIM.
English for academic purposes has very specific and wide ranging goals to cater to a
dynamic and diverse student population to meet the respective objectives in their
mainstream academic courses. Hence, designing and developing course materials for
such courses need careful consideration of linguistic, pedagogical as well as the
contextual factors involved. The English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP)
programme developed by the Open University of Sri Lanka faces the challenge of
catering to a diverse student population from different educational and socio-economical
backgrounds and as such, needs a more dynamic approach to materials design and the
teaching process. Hence, the efficacy of EGAP materials in catering to the academic
language needs of Science undergraduates forms the other main dimension of the
research.

Since inception of the EGAP programme in 2010, many gaps have been observed in
various aspects of the course. The difficulties faced by students in adjusting to the DE
mode education, ineffectiveness of support systems to create an effective learner-context
interface are among the gaps observed. Further, weak articulation of the role of materials
in DE by the stake holders and as a result the inefficacy of materials as SIM, lack of self-
direction, autonomy on the part of learners and teachers are some of the issues identified
through years of practice and research. Hence, research informed innovative approaches
to materials design and English Language Teaching (ELT) in DE have been identified as
current needs to be addressed effectively.

The aim of this study is to explore in depth the complexities involved with numerous
factors that contribute to the course, the impact of those on the negotiation of stake
holders with course materials and to ascertain the efficacy of course materials in dealing
with the intricate web of interacting factors. The findings of the research are expected to
contribute towards a more streamlined approach to design and production of course
materials for EGAP to suit the diverse student clientele. This study will also provide
insights into the areas of further research that will have a positive contribution towards
the field. Further, the findings of the study are expected to enhance practice and inform policy-making.

Two main arguments guide the course of the thesis. The first is the emphasis on SIM to be interactive and dynamic to facilitate self-learning. The ultimate aim of self-learning is to enhance autonomy among the learners. In the context under focus, self-learning and autonomy are expected to facilitate more effective transfer of generic skills across disciplines and support learners to develop capacity in terms of academic language skills in their respective disciplines. The second argument is that English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programmes should address the disciplinary specificity through an English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) element as EGAP element alone prove to be inadequate in terms of long term requirements of English for Academic Purposes (EAP).

1.3 Distance Education in Sri Lanka

The concept of distance education was introduced to Sri Lanka in 1976 with the establishment of Sri Lanka Institute of Distance Education (SLIDE). The objective of the SLIDE was to provide education at tertiary level, mainly in the fields of Mathematics, Science, Management, Science and Technical Studies for the learners who could not gain entrance to the institutions of higher education due to socio-economic factors and many other reasons.

The state policy of 'Free Education' for all which remains unchanged till date, identifies the need to ensure higher education opportunities for all the citizens in the country. The demand for higher education kept on increasing and as a result the expansion of conventional universities happened over the decades. "Even though conventional universities expanded with consequent increases in the investments therein, they still could not cope with the increase in demand for higher education" (Kotelawele and Samarasundara, 1987. p. 731). Hence, the Open University was set up to fulfil the needs of those who had lost an opportunity for higher education due to various reasons.
Since the establishment of the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) in 1980, the practices of distance education has spread widely in the country and has taken root in many national universities, affiliated universities and educational institutions in Sri Lanka. The OUSL is the only single mode distance education university in the country and also is a national university. The structure of OUSL is built up around a decentralized delivery system in which the departments and members of the faculties as a whole are responsible for their individual courses. The course materials distribution, technological support and infrastructure are handled by the central management. As such, the coordination among various sectors involved in course delivery is essential for effective functioning of a course.

In a study system where face-to-face interactions are limited, the academic departments hold the sole responsibility of deciding and designing interactive sessions. Student support services provide the statistical, logistical and infrastructure facilities in conducting the programs and through the student assessment and evaluation processes.

Apart from government institutions, many private sector establishments are offering distance mode courses either singly or in collaboration with local or international institutions. OUSL as the first and the most well established single mode institution in Sri Lanka is faced with heavy competition with other DE mode institutions in terms of quality of programs, resources and financial viability in attracting and servicing the intended student clientele. Overall, the opportunities for higher education through distance mode is on the increase in Sri Lanka giving higher education, technical educational and professional development opportunities for many students.

1.3.1 The Open University of Sri Lanka

The Open University was established under section 18 and section 23 (1) of the Universities Act No.16 of 1978. The OUSL became fully operative in 1980, under the OUSL ordinance No. 3 of 1980. It incorporated within its system, the External Services Agency (ESA) and the Sri Lanka Institute of Distance Education (SLIDE). At the inception, the academic programs of the OUSL were conducted by two boards of study,
the Board of study for Management, Science and Technology and the Board of Management for Humanities and Social Sciences. These two boards were serviced by the Library, the Audio-Visual Section, Computer Unit, the Printing Press and the regional and Study centres administered by the Regional Education Service.

The Open University of Sri Lanka was the first university in Sri Lanka to offer programs in study leading to certificates, diplomas, degrees and post graduate diplomas and degrees through the distance mode. The decision of the government to establish OUSL comes in a context where access to higher education was limited due to the lack of opportunities in conventional university system. "This decision reflects the commitment of the government to the principle of democratization at the level of higher education". (Corporate Plan 2006 – 2010, the Open University of Sri Lanka)

The Open University has five Faculties: Faculty of Engineering Technology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Faculty of Natural Sciences Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Nursing. The faculty of Nursing being the latest addition, the OUSL is expanding the disciplinary diversity in higher education opportunities. This implies the expanding requirements for academic language skills across disciplines.

The Open University possesses several unique characteristics:

- It follows the 'Principles of Open Learning'
- It provides a ladder for educational progression
- It serves a heterogeneous student population
- Large percentage of students in OUSL are employed
- Education is delivered through the distance mode
- It functions through a network of regional and study centres
- Serves students through student support services
- It maintains close collaboration with other educational institutions

(Corporate Plan 2006 – 2010, The Open University of Sri Lanka)
1.3.1.1 Study System

If education systems are to be truly student-centred, students’ views should be consulted about the process of learning and teaching. Moreover, within the current higher education climate, it is imperative that institutions move from an 'inside out' approach, where those on the inside decide what is best, to an 'outside in' approach where the expectations of stakeholders are researched and serviced. Therefore, the system of study is designed to support a distance learner through multiple media which cater to the educational requirements of the diverse student population in the best possible way, within the scope of the available resources. Further, OUSL is in a progressive path towards improving the available resources and addition of latest technologies to enhance its outreach. Moreover, a multimedia study system adapted to suit local conditions was developed where face-to-face teaching was minimal. The media of lesson delivery includes specially designed printed lesson material for a self-learner which is the main mode of delivery and supplemented by audio visual aids, discussions and day classes, seminars, workshops, tutor clinics, laboratory and field work, factory/industry visits, emails and internet.

In spite of learning in the Open University being much aided by technological advancements, many drawbacks can be observed. The quality of printed materials is a major issue. It is an accepted fact that self-learning materials should be well illustrated and attractive to motivate the students. Such features are lacking to a great extent in OUSL materials mainly due to the logistical issues. Further, the appropriate choice of technology is mostly sidelined by the use of available technology. Hence, efforts should be made to make more conscious choices in terms of course materials and technological aids. Further, materials need to be made more attractive to create interest and motivation.

As a distance and open education institution, the enrolment opportunities are open to a wide range of student clientele. OUSL focuses on catering to the following kind of student population across the island.

- Working population who cannot attend full-time universities
- Workers in various sectors who lack technical education
• G.C.E. A/L (General Certificate in Education Advanced Level Examination) completers who cannot go to the conventional universities for financial/family reasons, etc.
• Work force who require continuing professional development
• Persons who want to acquire knowledge for specific reasons
  (Corporate Plan 2006 – 2010, The Open University of Sri Lanka)

1.3.1.2 Goals of the Open University of Sri Lanka

• Enhancement and consolidation of quality, efficiency and sustainability in all current activities by creating a more conducive environment
• Enhancement of the openness, scope and the reach of academic programs with special emphasis on information technology to fulfil individual and national requirements
• Quality assurance in all aspects of Open and Distance Learning (ODL)
• Enhancement of institutional capacity to achieve excellence in teaching/learning, research and scholarship (resource generation)
• Develop modern, innovative and appropriate systems for dissemination of knowledge
• Enhance community development and leadership through a participatory approach
  (Corporate Plan 2006 – 2010, The Open University of Sri Lanka)

Directed by these goals, the Open University has taken several measures to enhance the quality of teaching, content, course delivery and the learning environment. Online and blended courses have become a component of many courses offered by various departments, to varying extents. It is observed that the department of Language Studies is lagging behind in this aspect when compared to the other faculties and departments but they are trying various on-line courses and continuously adopting in a progressive path towards reaching the student clientele through increased number of online and blended programs.
It has been proven through research and current trends, application of technology in education act as a motivating factor in the present day context, when catering to the present day generation of students. Incorporation of AV material and multimedia in teaching and the use of the network of NAC (Nodes Access Centres) in interactive teaching and marking session have contributed to enhance learner motivation and to create a more conducive learning environment. Further, these measures can contribute in towards increasing the outreach to a widely distributed student population.

The Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is gaining momentum in higher education, locally and globally. The OUSL (Open University of Sri Lanka) has already introduced courses in ODL mode in several key disciplines. It has now gained sufficient recognition both locally and within the South Asian region. "However, although OUSL has been in existence over three and a half decades, distance mode education is still not practiced optimally. The participation of other higher education institutions in ODL mode of delivery is also inadequate". (National Policy Frame work on Higher Education – 2009, pg. 22). This stresses on the fact that the Open University and its resources are not utilized to the potential and more innovative and novel approaches should be introduced to cater to the student clientele and the national requirements.

In spite of a very inspiring range of technological advances incorporated in to the learning process, the practical reality is way behind the goals. OUSL is yet to articulate the modern technology which can be more user friendly and at the same time not well equipped to handle the technologically aided knowledge dissemination. Even the available advanced facilities like Nodes Access Centre (NAC), elementary computer labs, Educational Technology Department are underutilized. More streamlined and well organized approaches are required to make the optimum use of these facilities.

1.3.1.3 Place of English in the Open University Curriculum in Sri Lanka

As observed by Raheem (2014), in 1980s when OUSL was established, there was only one major program in English, the 'Certificate in General English', for the general public
and adjunct courses for students in Law and those in Science and Technology. As further noted by her, by the 1990s, the Department of Language Studies (LSD) which was responsible for teaching of English had widened its repertoire and offered a variety of programs ranging from a beginner’s course, a Certificate in Professional English, an Advanced Certificate in English, a Diploma in English to a Bachelors Degree in English and English Language Education. In addition the department also supported other Bachelor’s degrees at OUSL by offering adjunct English courses for the students in the fields of Law, Management, Social Sciences, Natural Sciences, Nursing and Engineering Technology.

The new trends in language teaching are more focused on the authentic language use and incorporation of technology has become an integral part of education in the 21st century. Distance Education faces specific challenges in catering to a large student population distributed over vast geographical boundaries, thus enhancing the outreach becomes a necessity. Further, "the distance mode education places huge demands on the students in the form of requirement to engage in self-learning and to use more innovative, interactive and experimental methods for learning" (Satharasinghe, 2012). In line with those concepts, department of language studies is taking measures to make language interactive and interesting. Incorporation of audio visual (AV) materials, multimedia and online learning are few of those steps. Incorporation of more authentic materials and focusing on not only academic requirements but more pragmatic aspects like language use in day to day life, are changes brought about in making language learning more practical and meaningful.

A World Bank funded project called “IRQUE” (Improving Relevance and Quality of Undergraduate Education) project conducted an island wide English language proficiency test among all twelve conventional universities in existence at that time (2001), with the aim of formulating common bench marks at the entry and exit points of university education. Based on the outcome, the ELTUs (English Language Teaching Units) of the universities developed a Benchmark System (see Appendix 1.1) which is currently being successfully implemented across the Sri Lankan university system. This
bench mark system was followed in setting the target proficiency levels for the EGAP programme (Appendix 1.1).

1.4 Profile of Learners Pursuing Science Studies through Distance Learning

The Faculty of Natural Sciences of the OUSL was the first to award a B.Sc. degree in distance mode, in Sri Lanka. This degree has been offered since 1990. Under the six academic departments of the faculty: Botany, Chemistry, Mathematics and Computer Science, Physics, Zoology and Health Science, the faculty offers a wide range of courses varying from certificate to post graduate level degrees.

The interests and requirements of the student clientele vary considerably as the students are from different socio-economical backgrounds and different regions of the country. Their age ranges from 18 (the age requirement for enrolment) to even 70+ as there is no specified upper age limit. This opens doors to a wide range of students to obtain a B.Sc. degree without being restricted by any socio economical or demographic factors. Generally the student population consists of a higher percentage of young learners in their early 20s as many of them register for the program soon after their A/L examination. Depending on their A/L (Advanced Level) result, exemptions are granted from foundation level courses of the degree program.

In terms of proficiency in English at the time of registration, majority have passed either G.C.E O/L (General Certificate in Education Ordinary Level Examination) or G.C.E A/L (General Certificate in Education Advanced Level Examination)-General English. There are students with higher qualifications in English such as diplomas, degrees and English medium degrees. Such cases are rare and found mostly among the employed students.

1.5 Introduction to materials in use in OUSL

Printed materials are the main component of the self-instructional materials used in OUSL. Printed materials are supplemented by AV materials, interactive contact sessions and online lessons. There is a gradual increase in the supplementary online courses with the introduction of the concept of virtual classrooms. Currently OUSL offers over
hundred online courses as supplementary courses. In addition OUSL offers blended
courses which are limited in number due to the compulsory assessment at the end of
courses. The OUSL offers a few fully online courses at certificate level locally as well as
internationally.

The Department of Language Studies offers over 50 English language courses varying
from certificate to degree level. All those courses are mainly text based with a component
of face-to-face interactive sessions and almost all those courses are supplemented by AV
materials. A few courses are supported by supplementary online courses and interactive
sessions in the form of workshops.

Face-to-face workshops had proved to be very effective with students taking a keen
interest in attending and learning from them. Some workshops conducted via NAC
(Nodes Access Centres) were successful but the problems in organizing, the high cost
involved in using the NAC and unfamiliarity of tutors and learners on this mode of
knowledge dissemination (Tele-conferencing) hindered the success of conducting such
workshops on a regular basis. Currently OUSL offers the NAC facility free of charge and
hence, workshops via NAC could be tried out on a regular basis. This can be used as an
effective mode to increase the outreach and also as a way of giving learners more access
to the expertise of different language areas.

Though the use of AV materials and multimedia is a common practice across all the
language courses offered by the Department of Language Studies, low maintenance and
quality of the equipment cause serious constraints in the contact sessions. Further, the
inequality in availability and quality of resources across centres also is a constraint.
Those are much common to the EGAP programme as well. As such, more attention and
remedial measures are needed in this regard in order to maintain smooth functioning of
the courses.
1.6 EGAP Program

EGAP programme implemented in 2010, proved to be appealing to the students as it employed a contemporary approach to English language teaching which incorporated all four language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. This approach is introduced to English course in OUSL through the EGAP programme EGAP program is a compulsory academic component of main stream degree programs offered by the Open University of Sri Lanka. EGAP is offered twice a year. The first program which is offered to science, technology and nursing students, runs from February to June and the second program offered to management, social science and education streams is from July to November.

Since the program was first offered to social science students as a pilot project in 2011, the lesson themes are more focused on the interests of the social science students. As mentioned earlier, EGAP is offered in all six regional centres and annually it caters to a student population of around 2000.

Though teaching all four language skills was a positive move, there are many constraints involved at the same time. Teaching listening and speaking face many problems due to lack of facilities. Listening lessons are severely disrupted by the overcrowded and noisy classrooms. The low quality of the audio cassettes are a serious concern. Speaking activities are mostly done as group or pair activities and sometimes as class activities. Lack of space in the classrooms, noise within and outside the classes, excess number of students and limitation of time are major constraints in proper teaching of listening and speaking skills. The solutions could be reached through institutional policy decisions to improve the quality of materials and facilities provided.

1.6.1 Course Material and Teaching

As a distance mode course, the students of EGAP like any other DE course are expected to work extensively, by themselves. In line with this concept, the students are provided with the following:

a) Study pack – (Course materials, time table, schedules)
b) Face-to-face Teaching/Discussion sessions

1.6.1.1 Study pack
Course material consists of printed books as well as DVDs. The students are required to read through the material, listen to the DVDs and prepare themselves for the face-to-face/discussion sessions. (Please see Appendix 5.1a on Eco-tourism for an example of one of the units)

1.6.1.2 Face-to-face Teaching/Discussion Sessions (Day Schools)
The day school sessions are a forum at which important components of the four language skills, Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking will be explained and practiced. Therefore, the prior preparation of the students is essential and of utmost importance for the maximum output of learning to take place. The learners are provided with a time table at the beginning of the program to facilitate them to organize their study and preparation time and make the necessary arrangements to attend the day schools. The teachers mainly play the role of a facilitator and learning largely depends on the time and effort the students devote on their learning and completing home assignments.

One major drawback is the lack of preparation for the lesson on the part of students. Many of them do not do their home assignments due to many other commitments or lack of motivation. The solution would be to design materials in a way that would create interest and motivate students for self-learning. This project is a step towards that direction. In Chapter Five, we have given examples of tasks, that students found interesting. Time constraint is a major drawback especially to practice listening and speaking. A more viable solution would be to incorporate suitable technological aids to practice listening and speaking on their own in addition to the contact sessions.

1.6.2 Course Structure and Content
The EGAP course pays attention to all four major skills of language, namely

- Reading
• Writing
• Listening
• Speaking

The course comprises 6 units and each unit contains 4 modules, one for each language skill. Each unit includes a DVD based on the unit theme. The course offers 14 face to face sessions of 3.5 hr duration each. These units are based on the Benchmark Framework for Academic English developed for the Sri Lankan university system. The units in the course reflect Benchmark 5 and Benchmark 6 competencies. (see Appendix 1.1)

The EGAP course deals with developing the intermediate level skills required for the academic success of the respective degree programs.

The course units are organized under one central theme for each unit.

Unit 1: World Personalities
Unit 2: The Open University and the Distance Education
Unit 3: Sports and Leisure
Unit 4: Eco-tourism (Appendix 5.1a)
Unit 5: Religions and Festivals
Unit 6: Gender and Representation

The objectives of each unit are provided at the beginning of a unit.

1.6.3 The Scheme of Assessment and Evaluation

At the OUSL course assessment consists of 2 components
   a) Continuous Assessments Tests (CAT)
   b) Final Evaluation

1.6.3.1 Continuous Assessment Tests (CAT)

The CA component in EGAP consists of 3 assignments. These are set as classroom tests. To gain eligibility to sit for the final examination, a candidate has to score 40% or more
in 2 revision tests. Those who fail to score 40% or more out of two tests will have to repeat the course. The average of the best two scores will be considered when calculating the average eligibility mark. Therefore sitting for the revision tests is an essential requirement for the students.

1.6.3.2 Final Evaluation

The final examination will test all four skills. There is one written paper to test reading comprehension and writing, a listening component and an oral test to evaluate speech skills. The test papers and the spoken English skills of the students are evaluated in a standardized evaluation process consistent across centres.

1.6.4 Broader Objectives of the EGAP Program

- To teach the generic academic language content
- To provide the learners with an all purpose grounding in academic discourse
- To teach the general study skills required in an academic context

EGAP program as an integration of all four language skills has specific objectives to be achieved under each skill. Since EGAP encapsulates benchmark 5 and 6 (6.1 and 6.2), those objectives fall under benchmark 5 and benchmark 6 of the university benchmark system (See Appendix 1.1).

1.6.5 Underlying Assumptions

- EGAP program teaches the learners the basic study skills necessary to deal with their mainstream academic program (Study skills-abilities, techniques and strategies used when reading, writing or listening for study purposes)
- Those skills are transferable across disciplines: the students are capable of adapting the skills to suit their requirements in the main academic discipline
- The authentic and general study material used in EGAP are appealing to the learners
- The general nature of the program content will facilitate teaching and overall delivery of the program
- Integration of all four language skills will have a positive impact on the learners

1.6.6 Strengths of the EGAP Program

- Ease of delivery over geographical boundaries and a range of academic backgrounds
- Compensate for the teachers’ inadequate grasp of discipline specific content
- Ability to reach masses with less practical constraints
- As a positive aspect of study skills based approach to language teaching, EGAP course caters equally to students from diverse academic backgrounds and proficiency levels. It can have a positive impact on the student clientele if the generic skills are effectively transferred across disciplines as assumed and expected.

1.6.7 Weaknesses of the EGAP Program

- Non-homogeneous groups like economically, socially and geographically diverse student population with varying exposure to the English language, may not be catered to evenly and effectively through a general EAP course.
- EGAP teaches study skills through a more general content which does not cater much to the academic needs of students from a range of academic backgrounds. Therefore, EGAP does not cater effectively to the linguistic differences across the disciplines
- Limitation of time for contact sessions is a hindrance for interactive and collaborative learning
- Limitations in feedback is another drawback. A feedback is not provided to the students on their CAT and Final examination performances.
- Limitations in resources and infrastructure facilities to cater to a large number of learners is also a drawback
1.6.8 Implications on Learning

It is noted that the students, language teachers, subject teachers and the researchers had many common factors in their perceptions. Previous studies based on the EGAP program, Satharasinghe, (2012) and a study on SIM (Self Instructional Materials) used in the EGAP program provide evidence for the following finding and observations.

- EGAP course fulfils the language requirements of the undergraduate science students to a great extent, yet there’s a gap left by the withdrawal of ESP courses. Measures should be taken to bridge this gap by supplementing with the subject specific language requirements.
- Medium of instruction (English) poses a challenge for science undergraduates in coping with their academic work. This language barrier is common to a vast majority of the students. Measures should be taken to assist the students by strengthening the current English program and supplementing with additional ESP material.
- Main difficulty faced in academic work is the poor knowledge of vocabulary. In addition to this, the difficulty in understanding scientific concepts and grammatical structures pose a major challenge.
- Students should be exposed to scientific English in order to effectively deal with their main academic programs
- Limitation in contact sessions restricts the exposure to the language. Incorporation of modern technology and supplementing with e-learning and multimedia would be more viable options.
- The re-structured SIM material used in OUSL are up to the required standards but further improvement should be done to make them more appealing to student clientele. Remaining material should be re-structured to maintain quality and consistency.
- Training should be provided to teachers to make them adapt to the distance mode teaching process.
• The students show much more confidence in their receptive skills (reading and listening). More support is needed in improving their productive skills (Writing and speech)

1.7 Problems of the System

• As the Open University is in the process of enhancing its outreach and quality of the courses, maintaining equal distribution of resources among the centres is a challenging task.

• Incorporation of latest technology into course delivery is taking place progressively but at the same time it is a challenge for local institutions (like OUSL) to keep up with the advances in international and private sector institutions. Further, when compared to the global context, in terms of advancement in Open and Distance Learning, OUSL is still way behind in reaching those standards. More importantly, the use of appropriate technology, proper maintenance, technical assistance and necessary guidance for use of technology need much improvement.

• The time durations of the courses and the long gaps of time between registration and commencement of courses, contact sessions and final evaluations and releasing of results, have a negative impact on the overall effectiveness of courses. Further, this leads to frustration among students and de-motivate them to follow courses in OUSL.

• The lack of use of available resources due to high cost, lack of proper maintenance and non availability of technical staff are serious drawbacks in effective functioning of the university. This has special reference to the NAC (Nodes Access Centres) in regional and study centres, which cannot be used to the potential due to high cost of usage. Further, many digital equipment cannot be used to the potential due to the lack of technical knowledge, low maintenance and negligence.

• Quality of materials needs much improvement, especially in terms of quality of print and presentation. University tends to go for low cost budgets due to
logistical reasons which in turn have a negative impact on student motivation.

- As OUSL has a decentralized delivery system, the effectiveness of co-ordination among regional, study and teaching centres is a crucial factor. The lack of co-ordination at times leads to disruptions and delays which affect the smooth functioning of the university.
- The lack of responsibility and accountability on part of the employees is a serious issue which leads to delays, disruptions and frustration among the students and staff.

1.8 Statement of the Problem

In spite of the fact that Science students are exposed to academic discourse in the form of printed material, lectures, discussions etc, which cover a wide array of scientific and contextualized language in the form of concepts, structures and vocabulary, the language skills required for academic discourse needs explicit instruction. As pointed out by previous studies, coping with the heavy load of academic vocabulary and complex science concepts need a reasonable level of command in the English language which is the language of instruction.

When English was offered as support course for specific disciplines (English for Science, English for Technology etc., as ESAP courses), the chances of incidental and implicit learning was higher since English was taught to a large extent through content based materials. With the introduction of English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) in 2011 as a common substitute for the ESAP (English for Specific Purposes) which were offered until 2011, students’ exposure to academic discourse in scientific contexts was further narrowed down to their subject relevant textbooks. With this further restriction on their exposure to academic English, it is questionable as to whether the generic skills and general content of the EGAP program cater to address required language skills of this specific context sufficiently. In the absence of extra support in the form of vocabulary teaching, exposure to scientific concepts, etc. the need arises to look into such demands of science undergraduates and cater to their requirements effectively.
At present the only certification in English a pupil obtains by the time he leaves school after 11 years of schooling is the G.C.E O/L (General Certificate in Education Ordinary Level Examination) certificate or G.C.E A/L (General Certificate in Education Advanced Level Examination) - General English certificate. Most of such pupils cannot read, write or speak the language at an acceptable level. Thus, they are unable to find suitable employment or proceed easily into tertiary education. They cannot benefit from the immense pool of information available through the multi-media systems’ (Reforms in General Education 1997). Therefore, the skills in academic English play a major role in the success of the learners at university level and for employment at the time of the completion of their tertiary education. In this context, it is the responsibility of the university to equip the learners with the level of language skills they need in tertiary education.

As it has been mentioned earlier, the introduction of EGAP in place of ESP in the OUSL from 2011, has created some gaps which could have a negative impact on students' performance in their respective study programs. According to a previous study with the Science undergraduates (Satharasinghe, 2012), English language tutors have pointed out that English lessons should be more content based and the teaching of technical and sub-technical vocabulary should be given more prominence through the English courses. Further, they have reiterated the fact that linguistic features in scientific English and understanding scientific concepts pose a huge challenge for the learners. The students were of the same view regarding those two aspects. This establishes the fact, that there can be many factors which can have a positive or a negative impact on teaching and learning, with the introduction of new courses or changing different aspects of a course. The academic discourse undoubtedly being one major aspect in question, proper analysis into the written discourse with reference to course materials could greatly enhance the scope of academic success in their respective disciplines.

The course materials being the single most important aspect of course delivery, its importance and the potential to serve the student needs cannot be undermined. The OUSL
being an institution which practices distance mode education, the course materials are designed as self-instructional materials to suit the distance mode learners. The materials are expected to promote self-learning and student autonomy. Further, the student clientele being adult learners necessitates the materials to follow the principles of adult learning to be effective sources of knowledge dissemination. As such it is of utmost importance to investigate the efficacy of course material in EGAP program to suggest and recommend necessary steps to improve course materials and overall effectiveness of the program. Therefore, this study focuses on evaluation of the EGAP course materials in context to address these problems.

Course Materials in use in the EGAP programme in the Open University of Sri Lanka - A Critical Appraisal

1.9 Research Questions

- How far do the materials of EGAP program adhere to the principles of DE?
- How effective are the course materials used in EGAP program in catering to the academic language requirements of science undergraduates?
- How effectively do the learners negotiate with current EGAP materials?
- What are the perceptions and expectations of teachers and learners of the EGAP materials?
- In what ways can these materials be improved to cater more effectively to the learners?

1.10 The Objectives of the Study

- To find out the extent of adherence of EGAP materials to the principles of DE.
- To find out the role and suitability of the course material used in EGAP Program to cater to the language requirements of science undergraduates in the relevant academic context.
- To find out the nature of student negotiation with EGAP materials.
• To make suggestions and recommendations for remedial measures for the existing gaps.
• To revise a course unit in line with these suggestions and recommendations.

1.11 Assumptions of the Main Study

• Materials should be further improved to facilitate self-learning among the students. This should lead to learner autonomy and independent learning which is ultimate objective of distance learning.
• Materials should be further improved and be supplemented with multimedia, blended learning and e-learning.
• The findings of many research studies establish the fact that individual in the process of language learning, has certain needs to be fulfilled and needs vary across disciplines. EGAP program should be geared to cater to those needs. Institutions and more specifically the course developers should be more sensitive to this aspect.
• Students need exposure to communicative language (more speech activities) which in turn will boost their confidence and bring about a positive attitudinal change.
• Content based language learning should be incorporated within the broader context of EGAP.
• Creating more awareness among teachers on teaching in distance mode and teacher training in the same context should be enhanced and promoted.

1.12 Research Methodology

The study investigating the effectiveness of EGAP course materials in context, in the Open University of Sri Lanka, is exploratory in nature. The data gathering was carried out quantitatively and qualitatively employing multiple tools: questionnaires, interviews, group discussions, classroom observations.
The sample consists of students, tutors/visiting academics, course material writers, language experts. The three modules of printed course materials used in EGAP program were analysed in general and one Unit (Unit 4-Eco tourism- Appendix 5.1a) in particular. The student sample was selected as random stratified sample representing all regional centres proportionately according to the number of registered students in each centre. Tutors/visiting academics, course material writers, language experts, are selected as purposive samples to represent the total population. The three modules of printed course materials used in EGAP program were selected for analysis of materials.

The nature of study, sample selected and the tools used in the research are diagrammatically represented as follows.

**Figure 1.1 -Research Design**

1.13 Design of the Thesis

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter One discusses the background to the study and the relevance and significance of the study. This chapter discusses in detail the distance education in Sri Lanka; its origin and development. Further, the chapter
discusses in detail the context of the Open University of Sri Lanka. Since the focus of the research is specifically on the effectiveness of EGAP materials in the context under consideration, the EGAP Programme is discussed in terms of its structure, delivery, the study pack and the process of evaluation. Moreover, Chapter One presents the statement of the problem, assumptions of the study, objectives of the study, the research questions and also presents the definitions of the key operational terms (see Appendix 1.2). Further, this chapter briefly discusses the methodology followed in conducting the research, the design of the thesis and concludes with a summary of the chapter.

Chapter Two provides the review of the literature which focuses on the theoretical base and research studies carried out in the focused aspects of the research. The main aspect of the research is materials used in distance education and their efficacy as self-instructional materials. Teaching English as a second language at tertiary level and English for academic purposes form another important aspect of the background of the research. Learner autonomy is the expected outcome of self-instructional materials and distance education as a whole and the research study explores the efficacy of course materials in fostering autonomy among language learners. English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and its sub divisions of ESAP which was implemented earlier and EGAP which is currently in practice in the context under consideration forms a major discussion point in terms of justification of choice, efficacy and the existing gaps. Further, the insights and contradictions from the scholarship in the field of EAP and practitioner debates are discussed to situate the present study in the wider field of EAP.

The research design which is laid out in detail in Chapter Three, discusses the five research tools employed for data collection, the procedure followed, and the limitations of the study. As the study is exploratory in nature, the information was gathered by using many tools: questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, group discussions, classroom observations and materials analysis. The data was collected in two phases. The units that were designed in the intervention stage, were again triangulated and they were evaluated by students, tutors/visiting academics and course materials writers. A mixed method
approach was used in collecting data and hence the data were analysed qualitatively and quantitatively.

Chapter Four discusses in detail the outcome of data from each research tool and the interpretations. The interpretation, final outcome and findings were compared to come to a conclusion of the emerging concepts and opinions which in turn decided the final outcome of the research study.

The intervention phase is discussed in detail in Chapter Five. Some supplementary materials were suggested in the intervention stage, to complement the existing materials to enhance critical thinking and self-learning among learners. These supplementary materials were suggested for a selected unit (Unit 4- Eco-tourism, see Appendix 5.1a) Moreover, a new unit has been designed to illustrate how learners can be encouraged to blend local culture with international culture, move from familiar contexts to unfamiliar contexts and enhance their critical and reflective thinking in the process.

Chapter Five concludes the thesis with the findings, recommendations and implications of the research for its stake holders. The findings clearly indicated a wide variation in the educational background and the level of language proficiency of the students. Further, the findings indicated the need to enhance academic and support facilities to provide a better service to the students. As such, the necessity for improvement of materials and other support systems to create a more interactive and effective learner-context interface for better facilitation of learning as well as more innovative approaches to foster autonomy among learners and teachers are recommended.

The students’ requirement for an ESP element in the EGAP program emerges strongly from the research study. The necessity for collaborative research among EAP practitioners on the one hand and academics of respective subject areas on the other hand is documented in this research. The need is emphasised for more research to enhance the efficacy of building up competence through learning of study skills in English and effective transfer of the generic skills through the years and across disciplines to build up
capacity. These areas have been identified as essential and most potential areas of further research.

1.14 Conclusion

In this chapter the features discussed form the context of the study in detail taking into consideration the main factors that create the background for the study. It explored the Open and Distance learning in relation to Sri Lanka to situate the study in the broader context of DE. Further, this chapter introduced the context in focus: the Open University of Sri Lanka, the program of study in focus: the EGAP program and the student sample and student population in focus as a whole. Moreover, the chapter discussed the issues in the OUSL system. Finally, the chapter presented the statement of the problem research questions, objectives of the research, and methodology followed in conducting the research.