ABSTRACT

Course materials are the central factor which binds and links a process of an academic course. This becomes even more significant, unique and challenging in the context of Distance Education (DE) and language learning. English for Academic Purposes (EAP) has very specific and wide ranging goals to cater to a dynamic and diverse student population to meet the respective objectives in their academic paths. Hence, designing and developing materials for EAP 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 providing educational services to a diverse student population from different educational and socio-economical backgrounds and as such, needs a more streamlined approach to material development to meet the requirements of the learners.

Since the inception of the EGAP programme in 2011, many gaps have been observed in various aspects of the course. The difficulties faced by students in adjusting to the distance mode education and ineffectiveness of support systems to create an effective learner-context interface are some of the gaps observed. Further, weak articulation of the role of materials in DE by the stake holders, the resulting inefficacy of materials as self-instructional materials (SIM) and lack of self-direction and autonomy on the part of learners and teachers are some of the issues identified through years of practice and research. Hence, more research informed innovative approaches to materials design and ELT in DE are required.

The aim of this research titled “Course Materials in Use for the EGAP Programme in the Open University of Sri Lanka-A Critical Appraisal” 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 designing and production of course materials for EGAP to suit the diverse student clientele. This study will also provide insights into 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.

The thesis is organized into five chapters. Chapter One deals with the EGAP programme in the context of the Open University of Sri Lanka. This chapter discusses in detail the structure and objectives of the EGAP programme and its design to cater to the target student population. Further, the chapter outlines the objectives and the research questions of the study.

Chapter Two provides the literature review based on a few major aspects which are the focus of this 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 unit that was designed in the intervention stage, was again evaluated and triangulated by students, tutors/visiting academics and course materials writers. A mixed method approach was used in collecting data and hence, the data was analysed qualitatively and quantitatively. Chapter Four discusses in detail the outcome of data from each research tool and the interpretations. The interpretations, final outcomes 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.

Chapter Five concludes the thesis with the findings, recommendations and implications of the research for its stake holders. Further, it outlines the practical, theoretical and pedagogical contributions of the study to the context under focus in particular and to the wider field of second language learning in distance education. The findings clearly indicated a wide variation in the educational background and the level of language proficiency of the students. As such, the necessity for improvement of materials and other support systems to create a more interactive and effective learner-context interface as well as more innovative approaches to foster autonomy among learners and teachers are recommended. Some supplementary materials are used in the intervention stage and some new tasks are presented 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 thinking in the process. Further, the students' requirement for an ESAP element in the EGAP program emerges strongly through 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.