Designing English language courses at an open university: the WOU experience

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DESIGNING ENGLISH LANGUAGE COURSES AT AN OPEN UNIVERSITY: THE WOU EXPERIENCE

by

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Adult learners are the fastest growing population of open distance learners (Kim, Collins, Hagedron, Williamson & Chapman, 2004). They seek career advancement and opportunities to improve their quality of life through both undergraduate and graduate level programmes (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Many are married, hold jobs and even raise children. They shoulder educational responsibilities together with various other roles in life such as spouse, employee, parent and community member. These students are attracted to open distance learning (ODL) degree programs because they are able to maintain their careers and family life, yet still pursue a degree (Miller and King 2003). They seek programs that offer flexibility in time and place of content delivery, an institution that understands their learning needs, accessibility, and opportunities to control their pace of education (Wallace, 1966). With so many adults seeking opportunities for new learning, delivery of education via the distance mode has quickly expanded to over 1.9 million enrolees in 2002 in the U.S. (Allen & Seaman, 2004). In Asia, open and distance learning is also thriving. Tam (1999) has reported that there are a potential of 500 million students looking for higher learning opportunities.

There are many barriers that ODL overcomes to make it easier for adult students; physical distance, time or scheduling problems, limited number of available places and teachers, and cultural, religious and political considerations. But the responsibility for learning is squarely placed on the shoulders of the students. The hidden implication here is that the learners have the know-how and skills required to make successful and relevant decisions. But many learners who are returning to school after many years do not have learner autonomy or the language proficiency to handle studies in the English Language. To help students learn how to learn on their own is one of the goals of open distance learning and this 'autonomisation' rests largely with the teaching/learning materials that are designed by course designers and writers who are committed to this goal.

Axiomatic to the development of any programme of learning is the understanding of learners and their needs. Students who experience difficulty reading and writing in the language of instruction would need much language support to fulfil the requirements demanded by open learning. Keeping this in mind, at Wawasan Open University Malaysia (WOU), we have an open learning programme that is characterised by the following:

- learner centred;
- located in several regions;

- learner support provided in materials, method and counselling;
- access provided to further and higher education in institutions in the region;
- immediate needs addressed; and
- instructional resources provided.

Central to university access is language proficiency in the medium of instruction. WOU has chosen to use English as the medium of instruction for several reasons. Globalisation, and the impact of the converging technologies, is resulting in the formation of a new global order affecting many societies, including Malaysia, on an unprecedented scale. This has created the need for a shared linguistic medium and English has assumed its place as the language of communication. Using modelling techniques, researchers such as Graddol (2005) have predicted that English will become a second language for many, if not most, of the world's citizens by 2050. In this interconnected world, the position of English as the number one lingua franca for socio-economic development, over the next hundred years is in little doubt. It is viewed as an essential lever for success in the globalising economies, and thus carries the mantle of 'the language of power'. In order to supplement materials written locally, WOU is also in the process of obtaining world class learning materials from other world famous Open Universities in order to enrich the course content, pedagogical techniques as well as learning experiences of the students in order to be able to produce graduates who have a cutting edge in today's world who can adapt to both global and local needs.

Keeping in mind the above, it is important to note that effective language support is given at university level as this can mean the difference between success or failure of a student. Therefore, if the language skills of the learner group are not adequate, then the teaching approach has to be adapted to appropriately address those needs. If a language programme is to meet immediate language needs of a group of learners, it is necessary to determine what communicative tasks or skills are needed by the learners and then to decide which teaching approach to use to achieve these goals. Thus, learner needs and the context should determine and inform the teaching approach. If learners read poorly and are not able to understand their academic materials, then learning becomes a struggle to comprehend and integrate content. Weyers (1999) emphasises that it is widely accepted that 'target language input, specifically comprehensible input, is the first vital component in the language acquisition process'.

Failure to concede to this basic student need leads to the students' failure in acquiring the language of learning. Language input and activities should therefore carefully be selected so that learners can hear or see language that expresses some meaning. The input needs to initiate a process in which the learner's attention is focused on form through the use of genuine social and academic communicative activities. Thus, English courses that aim to facilitate language learning at tertiary level should enable learners to develop the skills needed to use that language in academic discourse.

Blue (1993) outlines some of the relevant communicative tasks as follows:

Figure 1.1: Major study activities and skills

Study activities	***Skills required***
Lectures(face to face, online, seminars etc)	Listening so as to understand content, coping with different accents and varying speeds of delivery, listening for key words and phrases, recognising discourse markers, assessing the importance of different parts of each lecture, making notes, asking questions.
Seminars, tutorials, supervisions	Asking and answering questions, understanding and expressing different points of view, comparing different approaches, ideas, reporting on work done, making notes.
Practicals	Understanding instructions, asking questions, requesting help, securing access to relevant equipment, etc.., coping with informal language and jargon, recording results.
Reading textbooks, articles, etc	Understanding the overall content, distinguishing main points from supporting detail, skimming, scanning, evaluating coping with constraints of time, making notes.
Writing reports, essays etc	Construction of reasonably accurate sentences and paragraphs, coherent structuring of ideas, referring to other authors.
Writing thesis/dissertation	As for writing essays, but with more importance possibly being attached to a thorough discussion of the literature, an adequate introduction, discussion, conclusion, reporting on

Study activities	*Skills required*
	the research project undertaken, knowledge of conventions for quoting and referring to other authors.
Examinations	As for writing reports, essays, etc., but with the added pressure of having to read and understand the questions, exercise one's memory, plan relevant answers on the basis of present knowledge, and write coherently, all under severe time constraints.

The list above indicates a formidable number of language and study skills needed by the learners at tertiary level and provides a valuable framework for determining which language skills are relevant for academic success. At most higher education institutions, especially institutions of open learning, testing and assessment are done in writing and most work is based on reading tasks as indicated by Figure 1.1 above. Besides acquiring the language skills to cope with the reading and writing tasks in English, learners need to be made aware of their language needs in relation to the tasks that they are required to perform. Thus, WOU's language courses aim to address the immediate needs of the learners and address the development of the above skills. Only in that way can it be regarded as learner-centred or adequately dealing with the academic literacy needs of learners.

At WOU, we are realistic enough to bear in mind that many of our learners may have severe lack of English proficiency and below average English reading comprehension ability which will have an adverse effect on learners' chances of academic success. Therefore, our English courses are designed in such a way that they form a 'bridge' to help low proficiency students improve themselves to such an extent that they will be able to handle academic discourse.

English Courses Taught under the School of Foundation and Liberal Studies at WOU

In this school, English teaching is unique in that it is spread across the various schools from different academic disciplines. Students from the other schools take about three to four of the English courses during their period of study. In addition, students also take a course called Learning Skills for University Studies that helps prepare them for life as an ODL student. English courses are compulsory to all students at the university. Under the credit-based system, these courses are credit bearing, contributing to the final awards of diplomas and

degrees. Because the credit based system would standardise curricula and assessment, throughout the various schools, the university is required to introduce common core language materials. The English courses that are currently taught are Foundation English, English for the Workplace, Writing skills for University Studies and Communication for the Workplace. These English courses are designed to accommodate the different language needs of students at different levels of study. Some of the main considerations that the course designers and writers had in mind was to remember that there will be many students taking these courses who:

- are not able to express themselves;
- are not able to communicate effectively;
- lack confidence in using the English language;
- have fossilised learning habits from the local education system;
- have mother-tongue interference;
- lack motivation to read in English and awareness for self-improvement;
- lack the skills to learn independently and
- have an English language standard that is generally poor.

Therefore, our course designers have given priority to four broad areas, namely:

- improving reading and writing skills(not forgetting listening and speaking);
- building vocabulary especially within the students' academic disciplines;
- build confidence and
- raise student motivation in language learning.

When writing English language courses for the workplace, consideration was also given to the fact that that today's global economy requires career specific language that includes workplace culture and jargon for safe, effective delivery of professional services.

The following premises were also focused on during course development:

- Course materials should anticipate a range of potential language needs and cater for students working in isolation;
- Course content should be selected on the basis of language proficiency levels of the target group;
- Learning tasks should model real-world academic tasks;

- academic reading strategies such as pre-reading activities, skimming, scanning, summarising and post-reading activities should be specifically taught with the contextual support given;
- writing skills needed in the academic context should be specifically taught, viz. their process of think-plan-draft-revise edit and rewrite should be practised as this encourages the process of discovering meaning; and
- Reading based writing tasks should be given great focus.
- Course materials should also enhance learners' capacity for critical reflection and autonomy by developing metacognitive strategies and involving them in choices about their learning.

WOU's language courses have focused on learners' immediate language needs as well as the demands of the context in which the students are required to function, both academically and career wise. The course materials have also been designed so as to make learning accessible and relevant and help students on the road to function independently by giving them 'scaffolding' help to achieve the desired outcomes. Low proficiency learners too have been given a programme that aims to help them improve their communication skills and prompt them towards picking up further language skills.

Finally, it is essential that we remember that the provision of adequate language skills will help learners to access tertiary learning, an academic qualification, which will remain unattainable to many learners with low language proficiency in their chosen medium of instruction.

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