



A STUDY ON THE USER-FRIENDLINESS OF LANGUAGE IN SELECTED OUSL COURSE MATERIAL

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INTRODUCTION

Exclusive adherence to the knowledge development and delivery methods of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) while implementing and ratifying internationally accepted concepts of lifelong learning makes the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) stand apart from the rest of the state universities in the island (Liyanagama & Vidanapathirana, 2012). Within the ODL system, apart from audio-visual and online material, the main component of the learning resources used in its teaching methodology is course material (also known as instructional material). In fact, the foremost service that is expected of an academic employed in the ODL system is writing course material. It so happens that when following a study programme offered under the specific system, the learner is not expected to attend every lecture (more commonly referred to as day schools), and it is course materials that primarily replace the face-to-face instructions provided by the conventional university teacher. Hence, these course materials are exclusively designed to bridge the gap between the teacher and the learner, and they must contain certain characteristics that make them eligible to perform this function with ease. Jayakody (2021), quoting Derek Rowntree, mentions 'guiding, encouraging, captivating, illustrating, elucidating, provoking, recalling, querying, discussing alternative answers, evaluating the learner's progress and providing fitting corrective or enhancement aid' as some of the features that must be essentially visible in effectively written instructional material. These functions are expected to be performed by written learning resources fitted into a stipulated structure that is well-elaborated in *The House Style* (1996) which is a comprehensive manual available at the Centre for Educational Technology and Media (CETMe) of the OUSL.

However, despite having all these characteristics, a course book may not successfully obtain the desired outcomes if the relevant instructions are not delivered to the learner via user-friendly language. The hands-on guide *Bridging the Gap: Distance Writing* (1995), which focuses on 'effective writing in distance education based on accepted principles', well particularises on methods in which the language could be manipulated to make the learning resources more user-friendly. Some of these methods are mentioned under 'Results and Discussion'.

However, not all sessions when presented for final editing exhibit user-friendly language, and this is a drawback that needs to be corrected if the relevant course materials are to reap the best possible results as ODL learning resources. A thorough search proved that no in-depth study had been conducted to date within the OUSL on the lack of user-friendly language with which certain sessions of instructional material have been written. Therefore, the current study aimed at studying the ways in which the language of a sample of the sessions have lacked user-friendliness, the possible reasons behind this situation and the measures that could be taken to rectify this issue. This study was also conducted in order to aid the relevant authorities in making necessary interventions in facilitating the process of course writing, and also strengthening the ODL system.

METHODOLOGY

While conducting this study, two hundred randomly selected sessions of OUSL course material were textually analysed as follows. The language editing of these sessions was done



following the guidelines provided in a chapter exclusively dedicated to the usage of language when writing instructional material in *Bridging the Gap: Distance Writing* (1995) which emphasises on writing clearly and plainly, and essentially, using a conversational tone as if the teacher is directly addressing the learner. The editing was done using track changes and the comments made by the editor was categorised into six aspects specified in the guide, namely: ‘choice of words’ (simple and familiar vocabulary, using second person pronouns), ‘sentence structures’ (short and simple with fewer clauses, use of contractions, usage of active voice), ‘paragraph structure’ (unified, coherent and well-linked paragraphs), ‘spelling’ (generally, the English variant used in OUSL course material is Standard British English), ‘capitalisation’ (avoiding unnecessary capitalisation) and ‘punctuation’ (meaningful and correct). This analysis was performed with the purpose of analysing to what extent the language used in the relevant sessions was user-friendly, and if and when there was a lack of the same, in what ways it had lacked. Measures were taken to make sure that all six faculties of the OUSL were represented when selecting the sessions. Furthermore, a questionnaire was circulated among twenty academics selected from those who had written the analysed course material (including both user-friendly and lacking user-friendly language) to investigate the reasons behind these drawbacks and also what prompted them to write in user-friendly language.

This study relied on both quantitative and qualitative data thus making the followed method a mixed method of data analysis with both types of data extracted from the textual analysis and the questionnaire.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As mentioned in the Methodology, during the textual analysis of the sessions, attention was paid to six language related specificities highlighted in *Bridging the Gap: Distance Writing* (1995) to gauge to what extent the language used in these sessions lacked user-friendliness. Out of the two hundred (200) sessions that were randomly selected representing all faculties, one hundred and twenty (120) sessions were well-written using a conversational style with simple and plain language.

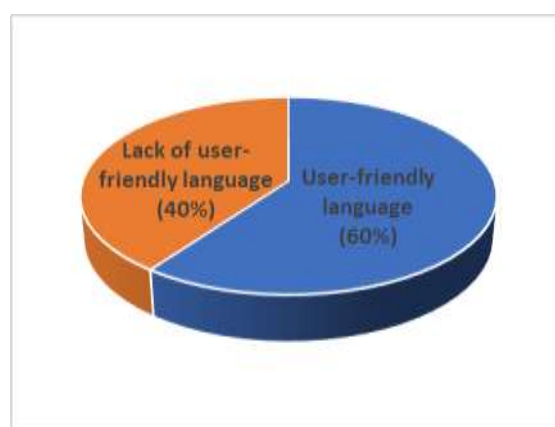


Figure 1: Sessions of course material with user-friendly language and language lacking user-friendliness

However, though 40% of the sessions lacked user-friendly language, it must be noted that they fell under this category due to various reasons. Basically, to what extent these sessions lacked the said quality depended on what aspect/s (as categorised above under Methodology) was/were missing in them. Table 1 provides a comprehensive presentation of certain



specificities of well-written ODL instructional material that were missing in the textually analysed sessions.

Table 1: Number of sessions that lacked user-friendly language based on the specific characteristic

Vital characteristics of language usage in ODL course material	Number of sessions that lacked the specific characteristic
Choice of words	55
Sentence structure	43
Paragraph structure	08
Spelling	67
Capitalisation	18
Punctuation	64

The sessions from among the 40% (as demonstrated in Figure 1) exhibited more than one characteristic lacking; while some lacked a few, the others had a considerable number lacking.

Among the listed characteristics, the least neglected were aspects related to the paragraph structure. As indicated on Table 1, only eight (08) sessions lacked unified, coherent and well-linked paragraphs. This could be owing to academics being more familiar with academic writing which prioritises cohesive and logical presentation that enables them to effortlessly link one idea to another while paying more attention to course content. Another comparatively less frequent mistake that was visible was unnecessary capitalisation. A majority of the authors had been aware of when to capitalise the proper nouns specifically related to their field of study and also when not to, depending on the context. The fact that they are conversant in their subject matter could probably be the reason behind this less visible shortcoming. However, there seemed a significant inconsistency in the type of spelling the writers had chosen to follow. Though it is not specified in *Bridging the Gap: Distance Writing*, the generally used English Variant in OUSL course material is Standard British English. This practice is particularly followed to maintain uniformity among all material written by the same. There was a considerable number of sessions written with American spelling making this the most common aspect that made the said sessions deviate from the rest. In certain sessions, there was a mixture of the two types. The most obvious reason behind this situation seems that information is fed into all computers in American English. Furthermore, in most fields of study such as Engineering Technology, Health Sciences and Management, academics extract knowledge from American textbooks, and they tend to use American spelling along with the respective course content. Another equally common drawback was the irregularity in using punctuation marks. Insertion of punctuation marks at unnecessary instances and ignoring them where they are necessary, had, at times, made those sessions fail to create the impact they were expected to make on the reader and deliver what they were to project. This seemed a concern related to lacking the knowledge of language among the respective writers and not with their knowledge of content. There were 43 sessions that had issues related to sentence structure. This is a very broad area in language use and one of the most common mistakes they had made (probably unknowingly) is writing very long sentences making the paragraphs look tedious and perhaps monotonous too. Especially, as these instructional materials are replacing the teacher, they need to provide information in small doses so that the learner may comprehend them with ease. Some of them contained too many clauses and negations that seemed quite baffling, and could even



completely put off a learner from a study programme. In relation to sentence structure, there were 10 sessions (included under 'sentence structure') that were written in passive voice which is not advisable to be used in instructional material. As stated in *Bridging the Gap*, since the verb of a sentence carries the weight of a particular message, it must always be precise and direct. Passive voice should be avoided when writing course material so as to reduce formality and distance which could be a hindrance when bridging the gap between the teacher and learner. Finally, the choice of words plays a significant role in writing in user-friendly language and the use of a surplus of lexicon and too many technical terms were visible in 32 sessions. This made the sessions' jargon seem too heavy and unattractive. However, it must be noted that sometimes, it is unavoidable to introduce many technical terms in course material depending on the subject matter. The author then has to work harder to assist the student understand the content of the material.

Among the 55 sessions that were flawed with regard to the choice of words, 25 had been written in the third person making their tone less conversational. Ideally, they should have been written in the second person.

As mentioned in the Methodology, a questionnaire was circulated among 20 academics who had written the selected course material (including both user-friendly and lacking user-friendly language) to investigate the reasons behind these drawbacks and also what prompted them to write in user-friendly language. Accordingly, some of the reasons behind producing course material with less user-friendly language were prioritising the course content with little or no attention paid to how the knowledge is projected to the learner, having trouble with shifting from academic writing (which the academics are mostly used to) to a more conversational tone (which is quite informal) and not having gone through the guidelines provided in *Bridging the Gap: Distance Writing*. The last reason seems a shortcoming of the academics who have not made an attempt to access a copy of the manual that is freely available at the CETMe. Three academics mentioned that they are not fluent in grammatical rules prompting them to make mistakes with regard to capitalisation, punctuation and sentence structure. Accordingly, they invariably had relied on the language editor to attend to the relevant corrections. Two stated that they prefer to have more lengthy training on the usage of language when writing course material in the ODL system.

As for producing course material with user-friendly language, the respective academics insisted on being conversant with the guidelines of writing purposeful instructional material. Eight of them stressed on the importance of being aware of their job profile as ODL teachers and how they differed from the conventional university teacher. All twenty academics unanimously agreed that it is vital for all OUSL academics to practice writing in user-friendly language in order to produce well-focused learning material that will be beneficial for their students.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The foremost service expected of an academic belonging to the ODL system is to produce instructional material that would replace the conventional university teacher since attending day schools for the Open and Distance learner is not a must. As a result, this particular form of learning resource is expected to bridge the gap between the teacher and learner to create a successful teaching-learning situation. In doing so, the relevant instructional material must be written in user-friendly language which seems to be lacking in some of the material produced at the OUSL. Accordingly, this study investigated on the user-friendliness of language in selected OUSL course material by conducting a textual analysis on two hundred randomly selected sessions representing all six faculties of the university and circulating a questionnaire among twenty academics who had written those selected sessions.

The results revealed that 40% of the sessions exhibited flaws that made them lack user-friendly language and these mistakes were related to many aspects such as the 'choice of



words', 'sentence structures', 'paragraph structure', 'spelling', 'capitalization' and 'punctuation' which are elaborated in the manual *Bridging the Gap: Distance Writing*.

The respondents forwarded reasons such as prioritising course content over usage of language, difficulty in shifting from academic writing to more informal language and lacking confidence in their language ability for the lack of user-friendly language in the selected sessions. The authors of well-written sessions vouched that being conversant with the guidelines of writing purposeful instructional material and being aware of their job profile as ODL teachers and how they differed from the conventional university teacher is vital in producing purposeful course material. Training on the usage of effective language too seems to be helpful while newly recruited academics should be made aware of what type of service is exactly expected of them as teachers belonging to the ODL system.

However, this study has focused only on certain selected sessions written by OUSL academics and is limited to the said university. This same study could be conducted in other institutes within the country that follow the ODL system to investigate to what extent a user-friendly language has been used in their instructional material thus making it beneficial to a wider scope of institutes that follow this teaching-learning system.

Despite this limitation, the current study has revealed certain vital information that seem useful in bettering the course material that are produced by the OUSL. It is hoped that the conclusions made from this study will aid the relevant authorities to take necessary action in further bridging the gap between the ODL teacher and the learner.

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