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Preparation of Language Teaching Texts for ODL Programmes in the Indian Context: A Tomlinsonian Perspective

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ABSTRACT

In Open and Distance Learning (ODL), where physical instructor contact is minimal, print and digital Self-Instructional Materials (SIM) serve as the vital vehicle for language acquisition. However, language texts in Indian ODL programmes frequently suffer from impersonal registers, rigid structures, and visual monotony. Drawing upon theoretical and practical frameworks from Brian Tomlinson's edited volume (2013)—specifically insights on humanization (Tomlinson), creative writing (Maley), visual architecture (Hill), and reading skill development (Masuhara)—alongside distance education literature, this paper explores the preparation of effective language teaching texts. It argues that ODL language materials must transcend conventional grammar-heavy models by employing conversational tones, open-ended creative tasks, structured pedagogical access devices, and learner-centred visual layouts. By aligning material preparation with the cognitive and emotional needs of distance learners, Indian ODL institutions can transform traditional modules into engaging, pedagogically sound resources that bridge the gap between isolated study and successful language proficiency.

Keywords: Open and Distance Learning (ODL), Self-Instructional Materials (SIM), Language Teaching Texts, Humanizing Materials, Visual Architecture, Indian Context

INTRODUCTION

Language education in India operates at a complex intersection of multilingualism, regional diversity, and varying socio-economic realities. In the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system, where face-to-face contact between educators and learners is minimal, printed and digital self-instructional materials (SIM) serve as the primary vehicle for pedagogical mediation. Unlike conventional classroom coursebooks, language texts in distance education must act as an in-built teacher. However, language coursebooks in Indian ODL programmes often suffer from rigid, grammar-heavy structures, low learner engagement, and visual monotony.

Applying the theoretical and practical frameworks outlined by Brian Tomlinson and contributors in Developing Materials for Language Teaching (2nd ed., Bloomsbury, 2013)—specifically chapters by Brian Tomlinson, David A. Hill, Alan Maley, and Hitomi Masuhara—alongside insights from distance education literature (Holmberg, 2005; Lockwood, 1998), this is an attempt to provide a brief transformative roadmap for preparing effective language teaching texts in Indian ODL domain.

HUMANIZING THE LANGUAGE TEXT FOR DISTANCE LEARNERS

Tomlinson (2013) argues that standard language coursebooks frequently present text in an impersonal, authoritative manner that alienates learners. In the Indian ODL scenario, distance learners often enter higher education after prolonged gaps, balancing employment, household responsibilities, and isolated study schedules. When these ODL language materials adopt a dense, academic register, they heighten affective filters and lower learner confidence.
To prepare effective ODL language texts in India, instructional designers must prioritize humanization:

- **Conversational Tone:** Language texts should employ Holmberg's (2005) concept of "guided didactic conversation," writing directly to the student ("you") using an encouraging, interactive voice.

- **Affective Engagement:** Materials must incorporate topics and texts that evoke personal feelings, lived experiences, and creative responses. In India, leveraging localized narratives, multilingual realities, and everyday social scenarios allows adult distance learners to invest emotionally in target language acquisition.

CREATIVE APPROACHES TO TEXT WRITING IN ODL

Alan Maley (2013) contends that conventional language materials rely excessively on predictable, formulaic structures (such as standard Present-Practice-Produce units) that induce cognitive boredom. For distance learners studying independently without classroom dynamics to maintain motivation, text monotony poses a major threat to course completion.

Maley advocates for integrating creative writing strategies, linguistic play, open-ended tasks, and literary texts into materials design. For Indian ODL text preparation, creative approaches offer distinct advantages:

- **Open-Endedness:** Rather than limiting activities to multiple-choice questions or single-answer fill-in-the-blanks, texts should invite distance learners to express their own opinions, draft personal responses, and engage in creative writing tasks tailored to their personal contexts.

- **Multilingual and Intercultural Creativity:** Indian distance learners possess rich multilingual repertoires. Creative text writing should permit controlled code-switching, translation exercises, and comparative linguistic analysis, utilizing the learner's native language as a cognitive scaffold rather than a barrier.

VISUAL LAYOUT AND PEDAGOGICAL ACCESS DEVICES

David A. Hill (2013) highlights that visual elements are not merely decorative filler; they play a critical pedagogical role in facilitating reading comprehension and reducing cognitive load. In distance education, where learners read materials without real-time instructor guidance, page geography and visual scaffolding directly dictate readability (Lockwood, 1998). When designing language texts for ODL modules following features must be incorporated:

1. **Access Devices:** Materials must systematically embed visual access devices, including unit overviews, clear learning objectives, visual icons for activities, and summary checklists.

2. **Typography and Formatting:** Varied font weights, framed text boxes, and marginal notes help self-learners distinguish core reading content from meta-instructional guidance.

3. **Illustrative Relevance:** Visuals must directly support text comprehension—providing contextual cues for vocabulary and reading tasks—rather than functioning as generic stock illustrations.

DEVELOPING READING SKILLS IN SELF-INSTRUCTIONAL TEXTS

Hitomi Masuhara (2013) criticizes conventional reading materials for treating reading as a passive testing exercise (viz. reading a passage merely to answer comprehension questions) rather than a dynamic skill acquisition process.
In Indian ODL language materials, reading is often the primary mode of language exposure. Masuhara's framework emphasizes text-driven reading development, where materials scaffold independent reading through a structured sequence:

Phase	Instructional Focus	ODL Application
Pre-Reading (Readiness)	Mental visualization and background activation	• Personal reflection prompts • Visual prediction tasks
While-Reading (Experiential)	Uninterrupted reading for global meaning	• Global understanding tasks • Self-check reading markers
Post-Reading (Discovery)	Language awareness and critical reflection	• Focus on vocabulary/grammar in context • Creative response writing

For distance learners, this sequence ensures that reading activities build genuine comprehension and confidence, rather than merely evaluating test-taking abilities.

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INDIAN ODL INSTITUTIONS

To modernize language text preparation across Indian distance learning universities, curriculum developers should implement three actionable steps:

1.Adopt Principled Writing Frameworks: Institutional course writers must move away from copying standard textbook chapters and adopt text-driven, humanized frameworks that prioritize learner engagement.

2. Integrate Visual and Pedagogical Design: Instructional design teams must work collaboratively—combining language expertise with graphic and typographical layout design to create scannable, low-anxiety self-learning modules.

3. Provide Learner Orientation on SIM Features: ODL universities must complement text distribution with orientation modules that explicitly teach distance learners how to navigate access devices, marginal notes, and self-assessment exercises effectively.

CONCLUSION

The preparation of language teaching texts in Open and Distance Learning demands a specialized synthesis of second language acquisition(SLA) theory, creative writing, and instructional layout design. Drawing upon the insights of Tomlinson, Maley, Hill, and Masuhara, Indian distance education institutions can transform traditional, mechanical study modules into humanized, visually engaging, and pedagogically sound self-instructional materials. By aligning text preparation with the lived realities and cognitive needs of distance learners, ODL programmes can bridge the gap between isolated self-study and successful language acquisition.

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