



## A Systems Approach for Training the ODL Support Staff on Written Communication Skills: A Strategy for Quality Enhancement in Student Support

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### ABSTRACT

*The primacy of communication skills for affable social interactions, employability and career progression is stressed by the National Communication Association survey and the National Knowledge Commission Report. For the Support Services Staff (SSS) in ODL system, Communication Skills form part of both soft skills and hard skills. The written communication skills are particularly essential in ODL scenario that caters to learners on mass scale [with divergent language and technical skills] as distinct from 'handicrafts' variety of face to face mode. The situation calls for training in media specific communication styles and formats in conformity with the institutional ICT policy for ODL and emerging options of collaboration for corporate training, educational back office processing (potential 'GATS fallout') and impending entry of foreign tertiary institutions – necessitated by self financing situation.*

*The SSS are victims of improper teaching of English during their graduation engulfed by deficiencies in curriculum content, delivery and assessment. Their language gap is widened by the scarcity of on-the-job training. The paper intends to discuss distance mode training strategy for inculcating written communication skills of the SSS; it could provide career progression too.*

*It is proposed to apply the systems design approach inspired by Checkland's soft system model, for addressing the issue of enrichment of communication skills in SSS.*

**KEY WORDS:** Communication skills; Systems approach; Support Services staff in ODL; Skill gaps

### INTRODUCTION

Communication has a vital role in ODL system. Its criticality arises due to distributed nature of program delivery and student support services. For a distance learner waiting for crucial information at various stages of study, the information must be made available at the earliest and with clarity. Lack of appropriate communication has been cited as one of the reasons for student attrition (Fozdaret al, 2006). This makes it imperative to ensure inculcation of communication skills among the staff at all levels. The scale of requirement can be realised, if we trace the recent developments. The distance education institutions have changed the scenario by offering education to a mass scale. The advent of ICT has no doubt made communication faster and easier; still, it has raised the expectation levels of the learners. It has also a compelling effect on the institutions to change the style and format of official correspondence (Moran and Rumble, 2004, p.210). The distance education institutions, even if they adopt dual mode, have to generate funds to sustain their operations; this segment, barring the government run open universities, is not offered any government grant. The institutions have to work hard to get a sizable enrolment. In such a competitive environment, the institutions have to be alert in adapting to changing modes of technology to offer quality service to the clientele. In the self-financing context, the institutions desire to expand their ambit of operations through unconventional modes. The result is corporate tie-up for the offer of many executive training programs. It is possible that many of these institutions could wait for collaborative ventures with foreign higher education institutions for even back office operations, once the Indian Parliament gives final clearance for their entry into Indian soil. Significant number of institutions are also waiting for approval for GATS related issues, since it could support new ventures. Newer delivery models and partnerships could emerge. All these developments have placed considerable demand for skill enhancement of the staff in the distance education institutions. We would like to focus on the measures needed to enhance

written communication skills as a facilitating feature for quality enhancement in student support services.

## DISCUSSION

The pertinent question is how far the institutions are willing to take up the challenge of skill inculcation. One of the significant aspects is that the support services staff (SSS) occupy the lower hierarchy in the power structure of a distance education institution. In spite of Becker's theory of human capital that recommends on-job training for increased productivity (Moran and Rumble, 2004, p.206-7), low paid workers are not the favoured class in this context. Becker himself proposed that such employees could go for greener pastures with enriched skills and should be made to bear the training cost. Even in advanced economies, the staff at the lower level do not enjoy much of in-service training opportunities. It is not surprising then that the tertiary institutions in India do not have a clear road map for skill enhancement for the SSS, where as training and orientation programs are quite significant for the academic staff. A look into the V or VI Pay Commission Reports of the Government of India could substantiate this aspect. A tradition exists that informal training and experiential learning are sufficient for the SSS. The Informal mode of skill training happens through on the job training under seniors in the office, subject to their willingness to give their time and share their expertise. In this respect, the SSS are analogous to workers in the traditional family based occupations or in the unorganised sector, where a person learns under a master craftsmen such as in roadside automobile works, restaurants, etc. The training of SSS is not considered an investment in terms of human resource. Even if an individual worker attempts on his/her own to enrich the skills, the facility does not exist for workload adjustment (Moran and Rumble, 2004, p. 37 and 223), leave alone other incentives.

Another aspect of concern is the level of English proficiency of graduates passing out of schools and colleges, who by and large, function as SSS. As is common among many of the commonwealth countries, the lower socio-economic status of many among the population, the type of institutions where they could get educated, the quality of English teachers they studied under and, the teaching materials available for their study, the individual aptitude for language learning – all these factors are cumulatively responsible for less than desirable English proficiency of many of the Indian graduates [Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), 2008]. Amidst the complexity of competitive atmosphere that prevails in the distance education institutions, the increasing enrolment, quality service demand from a fee paying population and the inadequate language skills that the SSS possess, the issue of language competency enhancement has to be tackled in a holistic way, for which we invoke the systems approach.

A system exists as a whole and has interrelated constituents or subsystems (Littlejohn, 1996). The subsystems are interdependent. Any change that we want to bring about has to be done considering the system as a whole. In other words, we cannot focus on a segment of a system in an isolated way without considering its other subsystems. In ODL system, the subsystems are Academics, Admission, Examination, Logistics, IT group and SSS. An ODL system is an open system; it means that it has input-output exchange with its environment. If a system does not have any exchange with its environment, it is said to be closed; a closed system need not have concern for what happens outside its boundary. All education institutions, ODL included, are necessarily open systems. The environment of an ODL consists of the Government departments, regulatory bodies, society, other national and international institutions, etc. The input-output exchange between the ODL system and its environment can be understood in terms of policy directives and regulatory stipulations an ODL institution has to face and, its contribution to the society in terms of number of competent graduates. If an ODL system is not an open system, its graduates would not be accepted by the employers or by other educational institutions for higher studies. An open system has a set of goals (in the form of its mission and vision statements) and it exerts control and self-regulation. The Act, Statutes, Ordinances and Regulations of the parent university function as controlling mechanism to regulate the institutional operations. An ODL system should make use of feedback mechanism from students and peer groups for exercising its control for regulated activities. Even if a policy change is to be brought out, feedback mechanism should be appropriately used to keep the institution in balance. An ODL, in fact, is a complex network of its subsystems and it maintains coherence and convergence through seamless exchange of communication. Any hindrance in communication flow will adversely affect the unified

configuration of a system and it would look to be divergent, which is not a desirable quality. In short, communication system should be quite effective in an ODL system both within it and with the environment.

Focusing on our theme, we have noticed that communication skill is inadequate with SSS. System theory requires that any discrepancy has to be addressed through modification or adjustment within the system (Banathy and Jenlink, 1996, 40). Certain times, it happens that the changes within the system are not sufficient. Possibly, the system as a whole is to be changed or a different system may be required, or a new system is to be designed. These changes are governed by self-regulation and feedback mechanism from the environment. It is possible that new components or new functions are introduced. The self-regulation feature is responsible for the response of the system for the feedback from the environment. In a way, the system co-evolves with the environment and brings about a transformation to a new configuration with increased complexity. The process by which this self-organisation, co-evolution and change happens is called systems design. In short, we would like to apply systems design approach for addressing the issue of enrichment of communication skills in SSS. Among the models available for systems design, we intend to make use of Checkland's soft system model (Banathy and Jenlink, 1996, p. 41). The soft systems thinking is appropriate for social systems, which are open, dynamic and, undergo fast changes. In contrast, the hard-systems thinking is applicable for engineering systems. The soft-systems thinking is apt for bringing about a change in ODL in the form of enhancement of communication skills of SSS. Checkland's seven stage approach (Naughton et.al., 1984) was adopted. To start with, wide consultations were held with the executives related to SSS as also with potential clientele. In an integrated way, the communication needs, available resources, the entry level attainments of the SSS, the required skill levels, the requisite ICT support – all these were analysed.

The elaborate analysis resulted in the formulation of a 3 - module structure for inculcation of communication skills – (i) Basic Module for Communication (for junior employees at entry level); (ii) Office Communication (for junior employees with 1-2 year experience); (iii) Communication on Governance and Regulatory Issues (for junior executives at entry level). The following curriculum was worked out for the first part and agreed upon by the Heads of subsystems:

Basic Module for Communication (for junior employees at entry level ) - 30 hours - identifying different parts of speech, appropriate use of parts of speech, use appropriate words in different contexts, conversing in grammatically fluent English and writing grammatically correct sentences.

For the modules on 'Office Communication' and 'Communication on Governance and Regulatory Issues', the curriculum is to be worked out. It was felt that the three modules could address the skill requirement in communication skills comprehensively.

In the context of skill development, Moore, Bates, and Grundling (2002) mentions about the systems approach used by Dick and Carey in designing the learning and instructional materials. Kanuka and Anderson (1999) state that systems design process enables educators to focus on the development of effective learning activities.

As a next step, it was felt necessary to have a pilot study to gauge the need for developing writing skills among the junior employees at entry level, who function as student support staff. The pilot study was conducted using an 8-hour segment out of a total of 30 hour study of Basic Module for Communication. The study group (SG) consisted of 10 learners. At the start, the members of SG were required to answer a pre-test, which helped to determine the level of English proficiency acquired through their earlier studies. The study material was posted in the blog and the link was sent to the respondents. They were given a period of 10 days for study and, a post-test was conducted. Pedagogic support was also organized as a support through two contact sessions and e-mail communications. A questionnaire was circulated to collect the response from the SG on the appropriateness of the material and the methodology followed.

The results are qualitatively interpreted in the light of literature reports on (i) the issues concerning second language learners drawn from the Commonwealth Countries (IGNOU, 2008) and (ii) interactions based Equivalency Theorem formulated by Anderson (2002). Significant findings of the pilot study are stated below:

Educational background of the members of SG and their parents indicate that 70% belong to category B learners, as per Koul and Creed classification [IGNOU, 1988, (a), p. 10-11]. These are second or third generation learners and are bilingual. Their English competence is not as high as that of category

A learners, who are descendents of those educated early in colonial period, possibly in foreign soils. The learners of category B could, as per Koul and Creed, manage English medium course with considerable support.

All the members of SG have a minimum of 13 years of study, while 90% are at least graduates and 60% learners have more than 10 year English study; still only 3 could get more than 60% in pre-test, which was set at High School standard. The SG marked their aptitude in the decreasing order as follows: Writing > Speaking>Reading. The socio-cultural and educational background of this group also indicates insufficient institutional, teaching and home support for learning English as second language. Such a situation is in conformity with the literature report that there is predictable conformity among the socioeconomic group type, the learner type it supplies, the school type that educates this type of learners, the teacher type such a school employs and the type of teaching materials and aids such teachers use in their classes [IGNOU, 1988, (a), p.13]. Even the preference shown for writing by SG stems from the compulsion of having to transact official functions in English. It could be seen that three of the significant features listed in Gardner's socio-educational model in terms of socio-cultural milieu, formal learning situation and informal language experience are not congenial among the members of SG to inculcate bilingual proficiency. [IGNOU, 1988, (c)]. There was a marked improvement in the result of post-test compared to the pre-test. This could be due to the 'comprehending of input.' [IGNOU, 1988, (b)].

The questionnaire responses are given below:

- a. There was strong agreement in relation to
  - (i) relevance of the study material
  - (ii) use of soft copy for delivery and
  - (iii) utility of the material in preparing for the post test.

Need for increased teacher intervention was strongly expressed. One of the workplace supervisors also felt that face to face interaction would be a better support, as the internet facility is limited to the SG members in the workplace as well as in their homes. As mentioned by Koul and Creed [IGNOU, 1988, (a), p.14] in the context of English learners from Commonwealth countries, SG members are used to the teacher dependent - lecture type situations, where lectures and drilling go together. We will address this aspect from a different angle in (5) below.

One of the remedies could be addressing inadequate reading skills of the SG members. The attitude for reading, as reported by SG, is the least [see (2) above] which is pivotal for self study in distance learning context. The causes for poor reading skills could be due to lack of exposure to using the library during their study period, poor home reading background and low parental interest in reading. The literature report on the influence of first language skills on second language (English in the present case) learning indicates that unfavorable attitude for reading in first language causes an adverse effect on second language reading as well, since transfer of reading skills becomes difficult [IGNOU, 1988, (d), p. 70-71]. The fact that all the respondents have studied in English medium in tertiary level has not guaranteed sufficient English language proficiency, as in the institutions, 'there is very little overlap between the concern of a language course and a subject course' [IGNOU, 1988, (d), p. 60]. There is a compartmentalised approach in teaching various subjects in English medium courses without any reference to the language competency.

Using a detailed study on the efficacy of various forms of interaction in distance learning, Anderson formulated the following Equivalency Theorem [Anderson, 2002], which is contextually relevant, while we think in terms of providing appropriate pedagogic reinforcement: *Sufficient levels of deep and meaningful learning can be developed as long as one of the three forms of interaction (student-teacher; student-student and student-content) are at very high levels. The other two may be offered at minimum levels or even eliminated without degrading the educational experience.*

Anderson also reports that the student-teacher interaction has currently the highest perceived value and it commands highest market value. It should be noted that teacher-student interaction is generally least scalable, signifying that for large scale training of employees, it would not be cost-effective. Alternately, it could be substituted by student-content interactions through videos, language labs, personalized FAQs, etc. These suggestions could be pertinent for disseminating Module 3 which is focused at the Executives, who have much better internet and ICT access as compared to clientele for Modules 1 and 2.

### SUGGESTIONS FLOWING OUT OF THE PRESENT STUDY

The scope for significant student – student interaction [that is critical for constructivist based approach] exists through the “side talk” among the learners. This needs to be properly exploited for language skill inculcation, as the SG members are drawn from the same location.

A rigorous evaluation of the materials of Basic Module for Communication needs to be done to ensure “guided didactic interaction” in the text materials and to have enhanced time flexibility to pace the study; these can provide for high levels of student-content interaction.

Efforts for encouraging reading habits could be valuable. Also instilling a strong desire for integrative orientation (learning as an interpersonal and a social asset) rather than for instrumental orientation (learning for specific achievement) in mastering English is a worthy initiative [IGNOU, 1988]. Addressing attitudes – whether reading or integrative orientation – requires enormous efforts.

The employer organization also needs to realize the cost and faculty time involved in face to face contact sessions, and be willing to provide for the required ICT support for Module 1 and 2 clientele for enabling internet based pedagogic support.

These findings have implication for the development and implementation of all the three modules.

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