

Self-Learning Materials in English Language and Literature in Indian Universities: Some Observations

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Abstract

Right from the commencement of distance education in India, self-learning materials (SLMs) are an integral part of open and distance learning (ODL) programmes in Indian universities. As SLMs are indispensable for the distant learners seeking tertiary education, some studies have tried to know the attitude of learners towards SLMs. In the post-pandemic scenario online education has become more popular. Besides, National Education Policy (NEP) - 2020 allows students seeking higher education to earn a maximum 40% credits through online learning. Considering these two important developments in the higher education sector in India, the present study tries to know if SLMs are really learner-centric. This study is an attempt to evaluate the course content of SLMs of some courses in English in the higher education institutions (HEIs) offering conventional and ODL programmes. After surveying some SLMs in HEIs across India, the study shares some major trends in SLMs.

Keywords: Course content, Course writers, Indian universities, Plagiarism, SLM.

1. Introduction

The online education in India has not only became more popular in the post Covid-19 pandemic scenario, but also gained more importance with the introduction of National Education Policy (NEP) - 2020. The University of Delhi (DU), Utkal University (UU) and the Directorate of Higher Education (DHE), Madhya Pradesh, for instance, have made available e-content (SLMs, podcasts, ppts and videos) for some courses through learning management system (LMS) on the home page of their web portals. Similarly, the University Grants Commission (UGC) in its Credit Framework for Online Learning Courses through Study Webs of Active Learning for Young Aspiring Minds Regulations (2021) has allowed students of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in India to earn upto 40% credits through online learning (UGC, 2021, p. 6). Apart from one open university at the national level - Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) and fourteen state open universities (SOU) in India, some central, state affiliating and private universities offer undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG) programmes by distance and online mode in the country.

The ODL programmes are offered by the centres of HEIs with different names like Centre for Distance Education (CDE) Shivaji University, Kolhapur (SUK); Centre for Distance and Online Education (CDOE) Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), Maharshi Dayanand University (MDU), University of Mumbai (UoM) and Gauhati University (GU); Directorate of Distance Education (DDE) Alagappa University (AU), Pondicherry University (PU) and Tripura University (TU); Directorate of Open and Distance Learning (DODL) Guru Nanak Dev University (GNDU); Directorate of Distance and Continuing Education (DDCE), UU; Institute of Distance and Open Learning (IDOL) UoM and School of Open Learning (SOL) DU and Savitribai Phule Pune University (SPPU), to name a few. SPPU (2025) has changed the nomenclature as CDOE (Notification dtd 09/07/2025).

Along with video lectures, audio-visual interactive materials, virtual classroom sessions, podcasts and personal contact programmes (PCP), the distant learners seeking admission to the ODL programmes rely heavily on the specially prepared downloadable / print reading materials provided to them. These are either called self-instructional materials (SIM) as in SPPU or self-learning materials (SLM) as in IGNOU. This article uses the term 'SLM' as per the UGC Regulations (2020:95).

2. Literature Review

There are studies on the usefulness and effectiveness of SLM in ODL programmes. Some such studies related to the Indian context have been reviewed here.

Chari and Haughey (2006) have examined the initiatives taken by Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University (YCMOU) in collaboration with IGNOU to develop online courses and discussed the issues in implementation. After studying learners' perceptions towards SLMs of IGNOU's study centre at Dehradun, Sachan et al. (2014) expect that for clear and easy understanding of the content, the writing style of IGNOU's SLMs should be learner-friendly. In a similar study of 100 distant learners of IGNOU's study centre at AMU, Farhat (2014) found that there was no significant relationship between the attitude of learners towards SLMs

and their achievement. Kalita Nath (2015) has tried to focus on how print materials in distance ELT programmes can be designed effectively to provide stimuli for thinking, engage learners in activities, and help teacher-trainees to use reflective skills. In a questionnaire-based study Mukhopadhyay et al. (2016) have compared the SLMs of IGNOU and Netaji Subhas Open University (NSOU). In a somewhat different study, Baruah (2018) reported the experiences of SLM development as a continuous professional development (CPD) activity of 16 English language teaching (ELT) practitioners comprising university, college and school teachers and teacher-educators who volunteered to write the SLMs in a GU, India and Commonwealth of Learning (COL), Canada project to develop a one-year diploma in the teaching of English for primary teachers. Here, several participants pointed out that their training in ELT pedagogy was not enough to venture into this uncharted territory of SLM development. Sahu and Mukherjee (2019) consider ODL as a panacea to address various issues related to English studies in India. They are of the view that the learner-centric pedagogy and delivery mechanism of ODL may help to increase Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of higher education in India and cater to the students intended to pursue careers in various fields.

In short, the previous studies have focused on the learners and teachers perception towards SLMs. In the light of this observation, the present study is an attempt to seek attention towards the course content.

3. Methodology

The examples considered in the present article are taken from randomly selected HEIs - central, state and private universities - offering conventional and ODL UG and PG programmes representing all parts of India like GNDU (North), TU (North-East), Madhya Pradesh Bhoj (Open) University (MPBOU) (Central), SPPU (West) and Alagappa University (AU) (South). This article restricts itself mostly to the examples from the courses in English language and literature offered by HEIs in India. However, a couple of instances of other subjects have also been mentioned.

3.1 Formats of the content of SLMs

It is obvious that no two HEIs may present the course content in the same format in their SLMs. One may find uniqueness in the formats of Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University (KKHSOU), Potti Sreeramulu Telugu University (PSTU), MDU, Vardhman Mahaveer Open University (VMOU), GU and Lovely Professional University (LPU). A cursory look at the points mentioned in the format for content of SLMs on William Wordsworth's poem 'Daffodils' in LPU, VMOU and YCMOU will be useful to know the variation in formats of SLMs.

In the SLM of the course ENG 258, YCMOU has included points like the poet, what is the poem about?, the form, the rhythm, images, metaphor, symbols, the theme, the setting, the poet's vision, difficult words and phrases, answers to check progress, summary, exercise, fieldwork and further reading (Shinde, 2002: 30-32). In VMOU's SLM of the course BAEG-03 - Poetry -Unit 1 we find objectives, introduction, life of Wordsworth, influence of the French Revolution and Rousseau on Wordsworth, background of the poem, the poem, meanings, stanza-wise summary, summary, critical appreciation, self-assessment questions (SAQs), answers to SAQs, let us sum up, review questions and bibliography [VMOU (n.d.) : 1-10]. In its SLM of the course Elective English-IV, LPU mentions objectives, introduction, about William Wordsworth, major works of William Wordsworth, writing style, poem - explanation and analysis, summary, keywords, review questions, further readings [Pandya (n.d.): 155-170]. One may also survey the content of the same poem in SLMs of these and other universities.

4. Major Trends

1) Course Syllabi and SLM

Open universities generally change the syllabi of their courses less frequently. Take for instance, the changes in the curriculum and syllabi of IGNOU programmes and courses have taken place almost after two decades. As sharing of resources is one of the unique features of ODL programmes, it is possible for the Odisha State Open University (OSOU) and Uttar Pradesh Rajarshi Tandon Open University (UPRTOU) to offer the same MA (English) programme and provide SLMs of IGNOU (See for instance, SLM of MAEN 10 - English Studies in India of UPRTOU) to their students. Here regional specificities are not taken into consideration. A reverse trend was seen in YCMOU. The YCMOU (2010), an open university, had offered MA (English) syllabus and SLM developed by CDE of SUK, a conventional university.

Unlike the open universities, the affiliating universities change their syllabi and SLMs regularly, generally after every five years. SUK and Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey Women's University (SNDTWU) have the same syllabi and SLM for conventional and distance education students. This makes it convenient for the teachers of conventional courses to use and recommend these SLMs for their students of conventional degree programmes. Thus, SLMs have become synonymous to bazaar guides. These were explored to the utmost extent by many users during the Covid -19 pandemic.

In some universities like AU, the syllabi of the ODL programmes differ from those of conventional programmes. In a university like SPPU, the conventional programmes follow Choice Based Credit System (CBCS) while the SOL

has an annual pattern. The syllabus, divided for two semesters for students of conventional programmes, is put together in the annual pattern for students of SOL.

2) Mismatch between the course content and SLM

Generally, SLMs of the courses are written by teachers from the university departments or colleges affiliated to a university. Now, SLMs are not only written and edited by subject experts from universities other than universities offering ODL programmes but also are published by private publication firms (See Table 1) resulting in mismatch between the course content and SLMs.

Table 1 SLMs and Publishers

University	Class	Course / Unit	Course / Unit Writer	Publisher
DU	B.A. I (Hons.) English Sem I (2022)	DSC-1 - Introduction to Literary Studies Unit III – Reading Drama Mahesh Dattani - <i>Tara</i>	Deb Dulal Halder (DU) Nalini Prabhakar (Ed.) (DU)	Dept. of Distance and Continuing Education, School of Open Learning, DU
MPBOU	Third Year BA/BSc/BC om (2020)	Foundation Course Paper II - English Language Unit 1 – Stopping by Woods on a Snowing Evening – Robert Frost The Cherry Tree – Ruskin Bond The Selfish Giant – Oscar Wilde Songs of Kabir – Translated by Tagore Unit – 4 – Narration Skills	Shuchi Agarwal (Amity University Noida)	Vikas Publishing House (VPH)
UoM	MA English Sem III (2025)	Major Elective Course – English Language Teaching	Roshan Benjamin Khan, Indore, Madhya Pradesh Sadaf Nasti, University of Kashmir Ravindra Tasildar (Ed.), SPPU	Centre for Distance and Online Education, UoM

Here two examples of mismatch from the SLMs of first year BA (FYBA) and MA (English) published by SOL of SPPU are considered. The SPPU has prescribed *The Monkey's Paw*, the One Act play for its FYBA Optional English course. However, the SLM brought out by VPH includes the short story - *The Monkey's Paw*, as the text prescribed. Similarly, the SLM of MA (English) first year course - MA ENG 03 'Contemporary Studies in English Language' includes the components which are not part of the syllabus, for instance, for Unit 8 - Syntax: Phrases and Clauses, the prescribed text is *English Grammar for Today: A New Introduction*, 2nd edn. by Geoffrey Leech et al. (2006). The SLM not only fails to mention 'The Genitive Phrase', but also provides thirteen pages (pp. 177 to 189) of additional examples of prepositional phrases which are in no way related to the unit in the prescribed text. These additional examples are neither useful to the students to understand the concept nor to prepare for the examination. One of the reasons for this mismatch between the syllabus and content of the SLM is the outsourcing of SLMs.

3) Outsourcing and SLM writers

Most of the universities have their own publication units. However, SLMs of the ODL programmes are not published by all the HEIs in India. There seems to be a trend to outsource the writing and publishing of SLMs. Hence, though the universities are different, the publisher and the course / unit writers are common. In Table 2 the publisher and the course / unit writers are considered as an example.

Table 2 SLMs published by Vikas Publishing House

University	Class	Course / Unit	Course / Unit Writer
	BA [English] Sem VI	Indian Writing in English Unit 8 - Sir C V Raman	Deb Dulal Halder

AU		– Water: The Elixir of Life	
		Unit 2 - Rabindranath Tagore - Where the Mind is Without Fear	Shuchi Agarwal
	MA English Sem II	Fiction Unit 2 - <i>Jane Eyre</i> –Charlotte Bronte Unit 4 - <i>Ulysses</i> –James Joyce Unit 10 - <i>The Tin Drum</i> – Gunter Grass Unit 12 - <i>Voss</i> – Patrick White Unit 13 - <i>The Vicar of Wakefield</i> – Oliver Goldsmith	Deb Dulal Haldar
GNDU	MA I - Sem. I (2023-24)	Phonetics and Spoken English	Deb Dulal Haldar, Shuchi Agarwal
	MA I - Sem. III (2023-24)	General Linguistics	Deb Dulal Haldar, Shuchi Agarwal
SPPU	BA [English] First Year	Unit 1 - Prose Pieces Unit 2 - Short Stories Unit 3 - Poetry Unit 4 - One Act Plays Unit 5 - Language Studies	Deb Dulal Haldar
		Unit 3 - Poetry (3.7 and 3.8)	Shuchi Agarwal
	MA I	Contemporary Studies in English Language Unit 1- Introduction to Linguistics Unit 2 - Word and Grammatical Stress and Intonation Patterns Unit 3 - Structure of Words, Morphophonemic Changes Unit 5 - Sociolinguistics Unit 6 - Semantics	Deb Dulal Haldar
		Contemporary Studies in English Language Unit 1 - Chomsky Unit 3 - Types of Morphemes	Shuchi Agarwal
TU	BA English Sem V	Paper G-5 – Elective English Unit 1 - <i>As You Like It</i> – Shakespeare Unit 3 - Porphyria's Lover – Robert Browning Strange Meeting – Wilfred Owen Units 3 and 4 - The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock – T S Eliot	Deb Dulal Haldar
		Unit 2 - On His Blindness – John Milton Unit 4 - The Rape of the Lock – Alexander Pope	Shuchi Agarwal

In Table 2 we may notice that not only the publisher (e.g. VPH) as in AU, SPPU and TU but also some of the course writers are common for both the UG and PG courses. These are course writers not only for the unit III - Drama - Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* in SLM of 'Introduction to Literary Studies' course published in 2022 by the SOL, DU but also for MA I (2023-24) Semester I Course - Phonetics and Spoken English and Semester III course - General Linguistics of GNDU. Here the course / unit writers are common for the sub disciplines of English studies like literature and language studies for the UG and PG programmes offered by Indian universities, whoever may be the publisher. The copyright of the SLMs remain either with the author or the publisher (e.g. MPBOU). It is to be noted that publication details like year of publication are not found in the SLMs of SPPU and GNDU and names of the course writers are missing in the SLMs of UU.

4) Errors of content and language

The syllabus designed by the experts at AU have put under drama *The 3 Mistakes of My Life* (2008), a novel by Chetan Bhagat. The same classification has been continued, without rectification, in the SLM, Block III - B.A. [English] Semester VI – Indian Writing in English. Similarly, we come across badly edited SLMs of some universities, such as the SLM of BA English I Semester 1 Core paper 6 - British Literature 19th century offered by UU. It is to be noted here that the DU (2022) SLM of B. A. (Hons.) English–(DSC-1) mentions:

“Corrections/Modifications/Suggestions proposed by the Statutory Body, DU/Stakeholder/s in the Self Learning Material (SLM) will be incorporated in the next edition. However, these corrections/modifications/suggestions will be uploaded on the website <https://sol.du.ac.in>. Any feedback or suggestions can be sent to the email- feedbackslm@col.du.ac.in.”

Besides, the IDOL of UoM (2023b) makes available unedited material for the students of MA II Politics. It would be interesting to study the English and Marathi versions of SLM of MA II History of the UoM (2023c).

5) Plagiarism in SLMs

Some of the universities in India acknowledge the sources from which they had borrowed the content for their SLMs. For example, the DODL of GNDU acknowledges e-PG Pathshala for the contents of its SLM of FYBA English (Elective) Semester II [See Sharma and Kaur (n.d.)]. Similarly, OSOU (n.d. a) in the SLM of MAEG English British Novel Block 2 Jane Austen *Pride and Prejudice* acknowledging IGNOU (2018) MEG-3 Block-2 mentions, ‘This course material is designed and developed by Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), New Delhi. OSOU has been permitted to use the material.’ In its SLM of Block No. 1 to 4 Unit No. 1 to 16, MAEG Course MEG-303 Semester: I ‘History of Indian English Literature’ on the page with publication details instead of course writers OSOU (n.d.b) mentions ‘This Course is taken from OER sources and E-P.G. Pathshala’. Besides, Tamil Nadu Open University (TNOU) includes anti-plagiarism report (pp. 276-277) in the SLM of MA English course MEG-15 Applied Linguistics (2021).

In contrast, all the universities do not do so. In its SLM of Bachelor of Special Education (B.Ed. Spl. Ed.) Paper-I - Pedagogy of Teaching English (SECM 02), MPBOU, for instance, does not acknowledge the sources in Unit 4: Current Trends in Modern English Literature in Indian context (4.3, pp. 103 to 118). The university has reproduced some part of the article ‘English Studies in India: Some Reflections on the Present Scenario’ (Tasildar, 2014) from *The Delhi University Journal of the Humanities and the Social Sciences*. Furthermore, the SLM mentions neither the year of publication nor the name(s) of the unit writer(s). Paradoxically, the page with publication details mentions ‘The views expressed in this SIM are that of the author(s) and not that of the MPBOU’. All rights are reserved with the university.

6) Some off-beat trends in e-learning materials

We also notice some off-beat trends related to e-learning materials in some HEIs. The DU had an altogether different experiment in relation to SLM. The SLM of the British novel *Heart of Darkness* [Prabhakar (Ed.), (n.d.)] is a compilation of critical articles on the text. Similarly, the Department of English of DAV University (2024) provides links of online reading materials like research papers and masters or doctoral thesis of HEIs from other countries, for instance, the department shares to its students a thesis submitted to the Libyan University of Benghazi in January 2014 on ‘Symbolism and Imagery in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*’ by Wraida Marai Imsallim.

During the covid-19 pandemic many HEIs in India had shared e-learning materials mostly through video lectures (one of the four quadrants of e-content). The digital space today is flooded with the course materials in non-print forms. As access to the e-learning materials available on the LMS of HEIs is restricted only to the registered students for the ODL programmes, it is also necessary to evaluate the e-content uploaded by HEIs for the newly developed courses under NEP.

5. The conventional and the ODL programmes

The students who are unable to attend classes regularly in the conventional degree programmes seek admission to the ODL programmes. The UGC has notified from time to time to treat ODL programmes equivalent to conventional programmes (see UGC, 2022). Now the ODL programmes also offer scholarships to the enrolled students, thus ending the distinction between conventional and ODL programmes. In the post-pandemic scenario the attendance in the offline classes has dipped significantly in HEIs across India. Besides, in NEP students of conventional programmes are allowed to earn a maximum of 40% credits through online learning. This has erased the concept of ‘distant learner’. These two recent developments would result in exponential increase in the users of SLMs. Hence, every HEI needs not only to maintain the quality of SLMs against the standards of materials development set by DU, the English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), IGNOU, NSOU and YCMOU; Study Webs of Active-Learning for Young Aspiring Minds (SWAYAM) courses offered by National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning (NPTEL) and ePG Pathshala but also to explore innovative ways of conducting open book tests (OBT) for formative assessment of ODL programmes. While

sharing his views related to the transformation of ODL to online learning, Rao (2020) lays emphasis on integrating technology in all domains of distance education from SLMs to online examinations. He is of the view that the availability of digital SLMs in the learner-friendly formats like kindle and mobile apps may help to overcome the challenges of using print SLMs. Expressing their concern over addressing difficulties like motivation, quality control, and assessment, Aher and Bhosle (2024) stress the need in creating high-quality, interactive SLMs and the need to have a fresh perspective on SLMs in this age of rapid advancement of technology with e-books and mobile apps.

Thus, the observations of the present study may provide some insights for the effective implementation of NEP where the teaching and e-learning materials are to be made available also in regional languages. This study would also be of some help to the policy makers and course writers.

6. Conclusion

Some of the SLMs surveyed here fail to meet the quality standards for SLMs [see UGC, 2020 (Annexure VI, pp. 95-96)]. Some of these SLMs are informative. The layout, writing style and content are such that they may fail to motivate the distant learners to study the courses. To make these SLMs more attractive and interactive, the course writers need to be trained in the preparation of SLMs (see Ansari, 2002). Despite detailed instructions by the UGC to the editors and course writers [see UGC, 2020 (Annexure VII, pp. 99-101)], SLMs by IGNOU (2004) (for instance, Unit 5 - Designing Self-Learning Materials), Manual for course writers (IGNOU, 2008), TU (see Sood, 2016), UoM (2023a) (Module 1 - Overview of Open and Distance Learning) and guidelines by the universities offering ODL (see for instance, policy on SLM by TNOU, 2020), we come across such anomalies. Can we consider these 'blunders' as 'trends'? More such trends are in the offing with the AI generated SLMs.

The SLMs, considered as standard substitutes to substandard bazaar guides, seem to have become synonymous to bazaar guides in the post-pandemic years. Hence, the course content of SLMs of Indian universities can be compared with that of the open educational resources (OER) repositories like egyptankosh of IGNOU, e-PG Pathshala and SWAYAM-NPTEL. Just like book reviews in the journals of Open Universities like *Indian Journal of Open Learning* (IGNOU), *NSOU Open Journal*, *Indian Journal of Distance Education* (Centre for Distance and Online Education, Panjab University) and *Symbiosis International Research Journal on Online & Distance Learning* (SIRJODL), to name a few, there may also be a separate section on SLM (and / e-learning material) reviews.

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