

Students' Perceptions of OUSL Courses: The Advanced Certificate in English Programme

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Abstract

The Advanced Certificate in English Programme of the Open University of Sri Lanka, warrants reviewing, evaluating and revising to meet present student needs, expectations and current trends in Open and Distance Learning (ODL). The perception of students towards the relevance of the programme, the teaching and learning environment, the assessment methods, and the course load were assessed. Data were collected by questionnaire and an interview schedule. The overall findings indicate that the respondents have a positive perception of the present Advanced Certificate in English Programme. The present choice of courses appears to fit the current needs of the students. However, there appears to be a need to update the course to include Business English, speech and presentation skills components along with a grammar unit in the programme. Additionally, the current face-to-face sessions need to be supplemented with online support.

Introduction

The Advanced Certificate in English Programme of the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) has been in operation since 1998. This one-year programme is designed for advanced learners of English who wish to enhance and develop their skills in reading and writing to cope with the academic demands at a higher level through the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode. It also includes an introductory course in Literature which provides a foundation for further studies in literature at higher levels. In order to enter this programme an applicant should either have a "C" pass in OUSL's Professional English programme or sit for an entry test. A study had been conducted on the Advanced Certificate Course in English which investigated whether the outcome of advanced language skills through the distance mode is affected by students' orientation to learning and by their previous experiences (Ratwatte, 1999). However, this study investigates students' perceptions of the Advanced Certificate in English programme with a view to reviewing the course in the

light of advancing communication technology. Presently, with worldwide access to educational instruction through Internet services, and the increased use of the Internet to deliver online courses along with the demands of time on students, it is essential that this course be reviewed and evaluated.

To validate this investigation, the perception of students towards the relevance of a course, the teaching and learning environment, the assessment methods, and the course load need to be taken into account in curricula assessment and evaluation (Ramsden, 1992). Additionally, as stated by Dominowski, "Students are...the consumers of instructional programs, so their evaluations of courses provide a kind of index of customer satisfaction" (2002, p.182). Furthermore, it is suggested that students' expectations and preferences are valuable data that will be useful in determining the quality and service provided by higher education services (Shank et al, 1993; 1995). A further factor that merits consideration is the increased competition for students because universities and private institutions offer additional degrees and flexibility to courses offered (O'Malley, 1999). Therefore, there is an urgent need to ensure that the Advanced Certificate in English Programme measures up to current needs and student expectations.

Open learning and distance education frees learners from the constraints of time and place and offers flexible opportunities to individuals and groups of learners. This mode of education delivery has been greatly enhanced through the development of internet-based information technologies, and in particular the World Wide Web (UNESCO, 2002). In the light of current technological advances and the use of ICTs in open and distance learning, this study seeks to investigate students' perceptions of the current Advanced Certificate in English programme.

Research Question

The research question on student perceptions of the Advanced Certificate in English programme examines the following: (1)What are students perceptions on the effectiveness of the present Advanced Certificate in English Programme? (2) Do the students agree that the delivery of the present programme equips

them to study in the ODL mode? (3) Does the programme meet with students' expectations and needs with regard to their careers?

Objectives

Therefore, this study is an attempt to make an assessment of student perceptions of the Advanced Certificate in English Programme offered by the Department of Language Studies of the OUSL in order to determine if changes are necessary in the present syllabus and course design to make it more relevant to the needs and aspirations of the students.

Methodology

This research investigated the perception of students registered for the 2008/2009 Academic Year, of the Advanced Certificate in English Programme. The sample of 23 students surveyed had either completed the course and sat the final exam or were repeat students.

Two survey research methods were used for data collection, namely a questionnaire and an interview schedule. The questionnaire was administered to 47 registered students of whom 23 responded. The questionnaire was divided into two sections. Section 1 was to ascertain the biographical and educational background of the respondents. Section 2 focused on questions related to the study. The interviews, with randomly selected respondents, were conducted both face-to-face and via-telephone. This allowed for a degree of flexibility in expressing opinions.

The sample consisted of 70% females and 30% males. According to the distribution of respondents by age, the highest percentage 35% were between 20 – 30 years, 30% were between 31 – 40 years, 26% were between 41 – 50 years and 9% above 61 years. According to the distribution by first language, Sinhala was the majority 56%; Tamil 17%; English 17%; and Other languages 10%. The medium of study of the majority was in Sinhala 56%. A significant percentage had received their education in the English medium even though their first language was not English (35%) and 10% received their education in Tamil. (See **Table 1** below)

Table 1 Student Profile

Factor Examined	Options	Percentage
1. Gender	Female	70
	Male	30
2. Age	20 – 30	35
	31 – 40	30
	41 – 50	26
	51 – 60	-
	61 – over	09
3. First Language	Sinhala	56
	Tamil	17
	English	17
	Other	10
4. Medium of Education	Sinhala	56
	Tamil	10
	English	35
5. Study of English Literature	Yes	30
	No	70
6. English Language teachers	Yes	60
	No	40
7. Entry into Programme	Entry Test	66
	Prof. English	34

Results and Discussion

The results of the study are discussed below according to the 3 research questions.

1. The Students' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of the Present Programme

The effectiveness of the course was investigated in 4 main areas – (1) Course Content (2) Course Material (3) Face-to-face sessions (4) Assignments

Course Content

An overwhelming 100% rated the Advanced Writing course as very good or good, indicating that this course was considered vital. Advanced Reading and Introduction to Literature likewise received high ratings of 91 % and 86 % respectively. (See **Table 2** below)

Table 2 Perception of Students Towards the Choice of Courses in the Programme

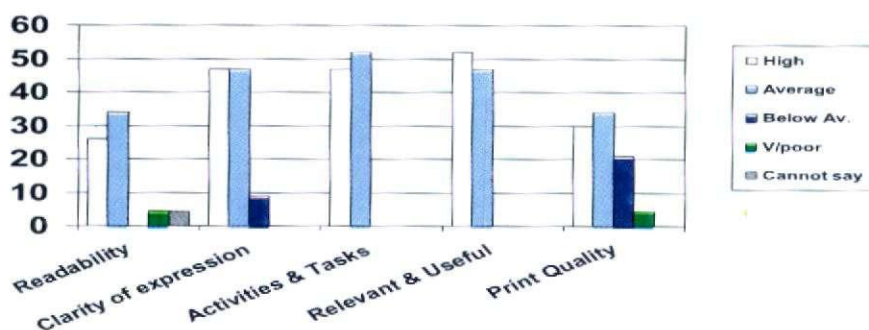
Courses	Ratings				
	V/good 1	Good 2	Average 3	Below Av. 4	Poor 5
Adv. Reading	52%	39.9%	9%	-	-
Adv. Writing	47%	52%	-	-	-
Introduction to Literature	60%	26%	13%	-	-

Suggestions for additional subjects included Business & Professional Writing, a course in Grammar, and a course on Developing Communication skills. It is possible that direct entry students do not have much exposure to Business Writing unlike those that followed the Professional English Programme. These were in the majority who requested a course in Developing Communication Skills, with special emphasis on presentation skills and speech.

Course Material

The responses on the effectiveness of the course material were obtained focusing on five aspects of the course material: (1) Readability (2) Clarity of Expression (3) Activities and Tasks (4) Relevance and Usefulness (5) The Quality of printing. Introduction to Literature was viewed as being effective in all of these aspects. Advanced Writing was viewed next as effective, particularly with regard to its relevance and usefulness. However, it was viewed as Average by as many as 65%. The quality of the printed material was viewed as needing improvement by about 26% of the respondents with regard to legibility and durability. (See **Chart 1** below)

Chart 1 Perception of Students towards the Effectiveness of the Course Material



Face-to-Face Sessions

A Likert scale was used to indicate strengths of agreement and disagreement to assess responses to face-to-face sessions. As much as 47% agreed that these sessions met their expectations. An overwhelming 90% indicated these sessions were useful and assisted them to understand the course material better. And 60% viewed the sessions as helpful in contributing to interaction with other students. While 47% agreed that the number of face-to-face sessions were adequate, 26% claimed these were inadequate. The data revealed that the 31 – 40 age group agreed that the sessions were sufficient, whereas the majority of 20 – 30 age group expressed the need for more face-to-face sessions. This may be attributed to the latter having fewer commitments and were less proficient with the language. As much as 90% viewed the teaching and instruction as being of high quality. (See **Table 3** below)

Suggestions on how the face-to-face sessions could be improved included spacing out sessions and including group discussions on assignment results.

Table 3 Perception of Students towards the Effectiveness of Face-to-Face-Sessions

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Gap between expectations and results	05%	13%	34%	30%	17%
Helped to understand course material better	56%	34%	09%	-	-
Helped to interact with other Students	47%	13%	26%	09%	-
Sufficient number of sessions	13%	34%	26%	26%	-
High quality teaching and instruction	56%	34%	09%	-	-

Assignments

A similar Likert scale was used to judge the respondents' view of the effectiveness of the assignments. Advance Reading Advanced Writing and Introduction to Literature courses were dealt with separately to examine differences of opinion with regard to the assignments set for the three courses. No remarkable variance in views was noted. The assignments that were rated by the majority as being the most effective were Advanced Writing 47% and Introduction to Literature 47%, and Advanced Reading 43%. (See **Table 4** below)

Table 4 Perception of Students Towards the Effectiveness of the Assignments on Learning

Rating	Reading	Writing	Intro. to Literature
Highly effective	43%	47%	47%
Effective	34%	43%	34%
Moderately effective	17%	10%	09%
Somewhat effective	05%	-	09%

Results of students' views of assignments indicate that an overwhelming majority (94%) agreed that the assignments were challenging and useful. It was noted that 65% disagreed and 22% agreed with the statement that the assignments were long and expecting too much from them. It was observed that these latter respondents were all females and between the ages of 31 – 50 years. They probably had many commitments at home and in their place of employment, thus limiting time for their assignments. The responses on the quality of the feedback and comments received from instructors were positive consequently, 94% agreed that they were useful. A majority of 82% agreed that the assignments were practical and directly related to what they had been taught (See **Table 5** below)

Suggestions expressed on improving assignments included use of email to save time and money, and avoid mistakes before the final exam feedback must clearly identify shortcomings and errors greater clarity in giving assignments and giving them early.

Table 5 Perception of Students about Assignments

Observation	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The assignments were challenging and useful	60%	34%	05%		
The assignments were directly related to what was taught and practical	43%	39%	13%	05%	
The feedback comments provided by the instructors were very useful to improve my learning	39%	55%	05%		
The assignments were difficult and long expecting too much from me	17%	05%	13%	60%	05%

Students Perceptions of the Delivery of the Present Programme to Equip Them to Study in the ODL Mode

The next research question addressed was whether there was student agreement that the present Advanced Certificate Programme equipped them to study in the ODL mode. The results indicated that 91% were clearly aware that the Programme was designed for ODL. In answer to the question as to what reasons motivated them to register for the course, four reasons were given for responses: distance mode, flexibility (can learn at own time and pace), the academic rigors; and academic reputation. Distance mode was indicated by 39% and 17% academic rigors. A probable reason for the 83% of the respondents indicating flexibility is the time factor with nearly all being employed. The fact that distance mode appeared comparatively low in their reasons for joining the programme was difficult to determine, even though many of the respondents lived away from the city of Colombo. A low 17% indicated academic rigors as a reason for enrollment which indicates that this was not for enrollment. (See **Table 6** below)

Table 6 Reasons for Students Enrolment in Programme

Reason	Percentage
1. distance learning mode	39%
2. flexibility - (can learn at own time and pace)	83%
3. academic rigors	17%
4. academic reputation	70%

The answers to the question regarding other reasons for joining the programme were the recognition of the OUSL certificate worldwide, the course fees being affordable, as well as to get a recognized qualification, to further their knowledge of English, and become fluent in the language. In response to the question whether their purpose was realized, 65% answered in the affirmative, 30% to some extent, with just 5% in the negative. Two suggestions made are given below:

"Our purpose could be better realized if the course started soon after the grading test."

"We like if our results were received promptly after the exam".

The next question examined respondents' perception of seven aspects of the Open and Distance Learning delivery mode. A majority of 73% indicated that they would like to have discussions about the course with the tutor online and 65% indicated that they would like to send in their assignments online. A possible reason for a negative view on the use of the online facility among the minority could perhaps be due to a lack of computer knowledge or access to a computer, as 9% of the respondents were above 41 years. This assumption merits further investigation. The percentage of respondents who agreed that the course material was adequate for them to study in the ODL mode is 64% and was adequate to do their assignments is 65%, and the feedback received was adequate for them to study in the ODL mode is 65%. The adequacy of contact with tutors for respondents to study in the ODL mode is 48% and the adequacy of activities and tasks contained in course material is 39%. The above results indicate that provision for more opportunities for contact with teachers and more tasks and activities would merit attention. (See Table 7 below)

Table 7 Perception of Students Towards the ODL Delivery Mode of Programme

Observation	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The course material provided was adequate for me to study independently in the ODL mode	21%	43%	09%	26%	-
The course material provided was adequate for me to do my assignments in ODL mode	13%	52%	09%	21%	05%
The activities and tasks included in the course material gave me sufficient practice in order to do my final exam without attending day school	09%	30%	17%	34%	09%
The contact with my tutors was adequate for me to study independently in the ODL mode	05%	43%	13%	34%	05%
The feedback received on corrected assignments was adequate for me to study in the ODL mode	13%	52%	09%	13%	05%
I would like to send in my assignments online	48%	17%	21%	13%	-
I would like to have discussions about my course with my tutor online	47%	26%	13%	09%	05%

In the face-to-face and telephone interviews conducted the question that was particularly given attention was whether the course should be held online with a reduced number of face-to-face sessions. The overall view was that the face-to-face session should continue, but more activities should be conducted online, such as giving them access to library facilities online; contact with tutor and sending and receiving feedback of assignments online. When this researcher inquired if this would present a problem due to lack of access to

internet facilities, the respondents indicated that internet was available in the areas they lived and the majority of them possessed their own computers.

Students' Expectations and Career Needs Met by the Programme

The final section of the questionnaire dealt with whether the Advanced Certificate Programme met the present career needs of the respondents. The majority 65% indicated that it was relevant while 35% were of the view that it was only somewhat relevant or not relevant. A possible reason for viewing the programme as irrelevant or somewhat relevant could be due to the fact that these respondents were not English teachers, but employed in other fields, as the programme is weighted for those interested in teaching English.

The majority suggested that the programme should include Business English, speech, and more grammar in the programme to meet their career needs. (See **Table 8** below)

Table 8 Perception of Students Towards the Relevance of the Programme

Perception	Percentage
Relevant	65%
Somewhat relevant	21%
Not relevant	13%

Limitations

One limitation to this study was the inability to establish the exact number of students who completed the course and sat the final exam, and those who were repeat students. Additionally, records were not accessible with regard to the number that dropped out of the course. A further limitation was the low response rate, a common problem encountered in qualitative studies in the humanities. Although 47 responses were anticipated only half of the students responded. Therefore it was not possible to obtain data from these students. However, to counter this problem in-depth interviews with randomly selected students were conducted.

Conclusion/Recommendations

Overall findings indicate that the respondents have a positive perception of the present Advanced Certificate in English Programme. The present choice of courses appears to fit the current needs of the students. However, there appears to be a need to include Business English, speech and presentation skills components along with a grammar unit in the programme. The course material was largely viewed favourably and perceived to be in keeping with their current needs. Nevertheless, the Advanced Reading and Advanced Writing Course books need to be updated with contemporary reading material and current writing techniques. The study also revealed that the students viewed the face-to-face sessions very positively, but every effort must be made to make these sessions more interactive and occasions for not only discussing material in course books but as opportunities for post discussion of assignments as well. The effectiveness of assignments as aids to learning was perceived favourably. Nonetheless, there is a need to ensure greater clarity in assignments and feedback on them. The study further revealed that flexibility and the academic reputation of the programme had contributed to the majority enrolling. If this perception is to remain, every endeavour must be made to ensure that high standards continue to be maintained in course delivery. A further need that emerged from the study was the need to supplement the current face-to-face sessions with online support. Online learning is being promoted at present; the mode of distance education in the future.

Therefore, as an initial step in that direction, there is an urgent need to make it possible for students to submit their assignments and receive feedback online. Additionally, students should have the opportunity to have regular contact with their tutors, using online facilities. As this study revealed, students do have expectations when enrolling in courses, such as the effectiveness of course content and teaching, the quality of service provided, flexibility of the programme as well as expectations regarding the course meeting their career needs. These expectations need to receive attention if there is to be student satisfaction. Therefore, every effort must be made to update the present course to fit student expectations and needs.

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