Investigating the Perspectives of TEFLers About Distance Learning: A Case Study

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Abstract

English, being the lingua franca, has become a dire need of our age to succeed academically and professionally. To fulfill this need, many higher education institutions are offering teaching courses to equip teachers with new methods of teaching. TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language), among many others, is also a teacher training program for English language teachers to improve and enhance their teaching and communication skills. TEFL, emphasizes the development of appropriate and modern teaching methodologies. The study is about the perceptions of a distance education program (DEP) TEFL students henceforward mentioned as TEFLers'. Most of the students consider improvement in vocabulary and better pronunciation as the learning outcomes of TEFL but a mismatch occurs between the objectives of the program and the students' perspectives. The study is a case study of Allama Iqbal Open University. A survey was conducted for the TEFLers of Bahawalpur region. A questionnaire was prepared to check their perspectives about distance learning. The study is quantitative and the result has been presented through the use of tables and graphs. The study proved that the students of distance learning do not have proper and authentic knowledge about program objectives. They develop their own perspective which may not be aligned with the set objectives of the program. The findings supported the hypothesis of the study. The researchers conclude with suggestions and recommendations.

Key words:

Distance education, Perspectives, Allama Iqbal Open University, TEFLers, Distance learning

Introduction

English teaching programs have remained a priority since the formation of Pakistan. The government has taken crucial steps to improve the standard of teaching English. There are many government universities which offer different teaching programs such as B.Ed. and M.Ed. for the improvement of teaching standard. Not only government universities but also some private universities are offering different teaching programs and performing their role in the noble cause. For example, NUML University offers ELT program which is related to English language teaching. All these programs are also offered as distance education programs (DEP).

Distance education (DE) is the most emerging kind of education and an admitted current reality by all the educationists of the present era. It is providing a golden opportunity to a large number of learners through on-line resources. Almost all the universities and colleges of the world are offering a large number of programs to all kinds of learners to meet the current needs. In distance education, the instructor and the learner are separated from each other in space and time. So, there is a need for some effective means of communication to lessen this wide gap. With the advancement of information technology, the distances have been reduced and the world has become a global village. Information and communication technologies have not only served man in his daily life but also in the field of education and research. A distance learner can apply all kinds of supportive technologies to acquire knowledge and skills on his own.

According to Moore (1972), DE is that type of learning in which planned activities are performed by the learners and instructor by the help of electronic media while they are at a distance from each other in time and space. This definition of distance education reveals that the process of distance learning is not an informal effort but it is highly organized and formal. Every kind of activity is pre-planned and set in due course of time according to the standards of course designers. It is not only the learning but also the skills which are delivered to distance learners.

Distance education includes distance teaching— the instructor's role in the process –and distance learning – the student's role in the process (Portway & Lane, 1994). According to this definition, distance learning has the same plan of education and elements of education system as on- campus learning has; the only distinction is the separation of learners from instructors.

Information and communication technology (ICT) has brought a revolution in every walk of life with the advancement of modern equipment and latest technology. In the field of education and research, contact with scholars, librarians, universities inside or outside of the country has become possible only due to the involvement of ICT. On- line teaching and learning have become possible due to ICT; therefore, it is an integral feature of DE. The number of people joining distance

education is increasing day by day all over the world and the educational institutions have to fulfill the demands of the people without losing quality and standards.

Wedemeyer (1978) states that DE is a varied type of education in which the independence of learners is the fundamental principle. According to Wedemeyer (1978), it consists of some important features considering learning outcomes. The learner should have freedom and independence of learning. He should be involved in the process at any place where there are students – or even only one student – even if the instructor is available at the same time and place or not.

It has been observed that distance learning programs remain beneficial at higher level (O'Malley & MaCraw, 1999). TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) offered by Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) is considered a part of distance education program (DEP) as it is a program of higher level education. The focus of this program is on English teaching and different methodologies related to English teaching.

Now some questions arise: (1) Is there any difference between traditional and distance learning programs? (2) Is the students' performance same in both types of programs? While providing answer to question 1, O'Malley & MaCraw (1999) state that traditional teaching is related to classroom and interaction between the teacher and the students. On the other hand, distance learning (DL) is directly associated with learning without classroom. These all DEPs are student centered (Osei, 2010) where the teacher performs the role of a facilitator only. Therefore, these modes of education cannot be considered the same. If variations are found in both programs then students perform differently and have different perspectives towards them.

Another important concern is that the students of traditional programs have clear cut ideas about the course contents and objectives. They know before-hand what the course contents or program objectives are and what they will learn after the completion of the said program. On the other hand, students of DEP do not have proper idea about the program objectives and what they will gain after completing that program. They develop their own perspectives regarding DEP which are not in alignment with the program objectives. However, when they find discrepancy between their perspectives and learning objectives/outcomes during or after the program, they get confused, startled and disappointed.

Same is the case with TEFL students (TEFLers). They set some perspectives prior to entering TEFL which is a DEP. Most of them consider improvement in vocabulary and better pronunciation as the learning outcomes of TEFL but a mismatch occurs between the objectives of the program and the students' perspectives. As Osei (2010) considers DL an important method of

education so all ambiguities of the students must be clarified before-hand. There must be a clear picture of DEPs so that students may build their perspectives in the right direction.

Therefore, the purpose of the study is to find out the discrepancy found between TEFLers perspectives regarding TEFL and actual learning outcomes.

Significance of the Study

The study will be beneficial for the students and teachers to understand the objectives of DL. They can get first-hand information about the general attitudes of students towards DL. This study is beneficial for DL institutions as well. They can work on this direction to help their students clarify their misconception towards TEFL, DEP.

Statement of the Problem

Distance education is a current challenge for the universities and colleges of the whole educational world. All the educational institutions of the world are trying to cope with this challenge according to their available resources. It has been observed that students do not have proper information about DEPs. They just read the name of a course and get admission. They develop their own perceptions about the objectives of DEP. When they face the reality, they become confused. So, the present study is a descriptive study which investigates the perspectives of TEFLers about distance learning.

Research Questions

1. What are students' perceptions about distance education programs (DEPs)?
2. What type of mistakes they make while getting admission in DEPs?

Hypothesis

There is a mismatch between the TEFLers' perceptions and the objectives/ outcomes of DEP.

Literature Review

Distance learning is performing an important role in the progress of higher level education (Osei, 2010). In DL, students are provided opportunities to perform authentic tasks to achieve the learning outcomes thus inculcating creativity in them and making them autonomous learners. They learn how to work with little guidance while using their effort and intelligence. In different countries, this method is used to facilitate far reached students (Osei, 2010). Different countries, from the developed to the developing ones, are trying to implement DEP in their countries (Akhter, 2012). In Pakistan, AIOU has been working since 1974 to facilitate DL students. AIOU is considered the oldest institution of Pakistan in providing distance learning. According to Akhter (2014), "Overview of enrolment trend in AIOU as reported by AIOU (2010) and AIOU (2011) indicates that

it enrolled 6160861 students in 17875081 courses during the years 2006 to 2011". This institution also provides many teaching programs such as B.Ed., M.Ed. and TEFL for teachers training.

Interaction between the teacher and learners is a basic requirement of DL which should not be delayed due to distance. There was a time when interaction was a tough job for DL learners; however, the involvement of ICT in DL has resolved the issue. Now we have resources which are helpful in providing quick knowledge about DEP (Yacci, 2000). Similarly, tutor plays a vital role in the DEPs. In DL, a teacher can be considered a tutor but his role is quite different from a traditional teacher. It is the duty of a tutor to facilitate students and mark their assignments and provide guidance while writing comments on their assignments (Akhter, 2012).

The most important outcome of any educational program is satisfaction (Akhter, 2014). If learners feel that their learning needs are fulfilled then they are pleased and satisfied. If a tussle occurs between learners' needs and the outcomes, they become frustrated. Therefore, an effective DEP must satisfy the needs of its learners.

The above discussion shows that DL is easily accessible due to ICT; however, issues related to DEP must be addressed seriously. It has been observed that DL students get enrolled in DEP without getting information about the learning objectives of DEPs. They perceive that DEP will fulfill their needs. However, when the outcomes are contradictory to their needs, they get confused and anxious. They grasp later that this program is designed to fulfill the needs of a proper discipline. Students taking admission in these program lack basic information regarding course content and objectives of the program and develop their own perceptions. According to Akhter (2012), it is the duty of a tutor to provide basic information about the content of DEPs. So learners would not become confused and may get proper and actual information.

Research Approach

The approach of the present study is quantitative. Data was collected in numerical form whereas results were demonstrated through tables and graphs.

Research Design

The present study is descriptive in nature which was conducted through a survey. All the students of TEFL program at Bahawalpur reign were the target population. The whole population comprising 70 TEFLers was taken as a sample. A questionnaire containing 10 closed questions was prepared on a Likert scale. The purpose of the survey was to check the perceptions of TEFLers about TEFL program. A clear picture was shown how students took TEFL program. After the collection of data, tables were made and graphs were drawn to show the results about TEFLers' perceptions regarding TEFL program.

Research Participants

70 TEFLers were the sample of this study. They belonged to different age groups. Some of them were fresh teachers and less than half were in their 40s. Most of them belonged to the field of English; however, a few of them belonged to other disciplines such as statistics and economics.

Data Collection Tool

Questionnaire

A closed ended questionnaire containing 10 questions was prepared to check TEFLers' perspectives towards TEFL learning. All the necessary instructions were written on the top of the questionnaire. The time to fill in the questionnaire was 30 minutes. Likert scale of "Level of Agreement" was used to get the answers from TEFLers.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

The researchers conducted a class activity of filling in questionnaire on the very first day of TEFL class. The students were handed over the questionnaire. They were asked to read the instructions on the top of the questionnaire. Later, they were given 30 minutes to fill that questionnaire. On the basis of that particular questionnaire, 5 elements were selected to make the table and draw the chart. Data was collected quantitatively and then calculated through excel sheets. After the calculation of data, the researchers made a table and drew a graph according to the obtained values.

Table 1:

Results of TEFLers' perspectives

Factors	Agree	Disagree
Improve Speaking skills	80%	20%
Enhance Vocabulary	70%	30%
Confidence Increased	90%	10%
Learn Teaching Methodologies	30%	70%
Become Good teachers	50%	50%
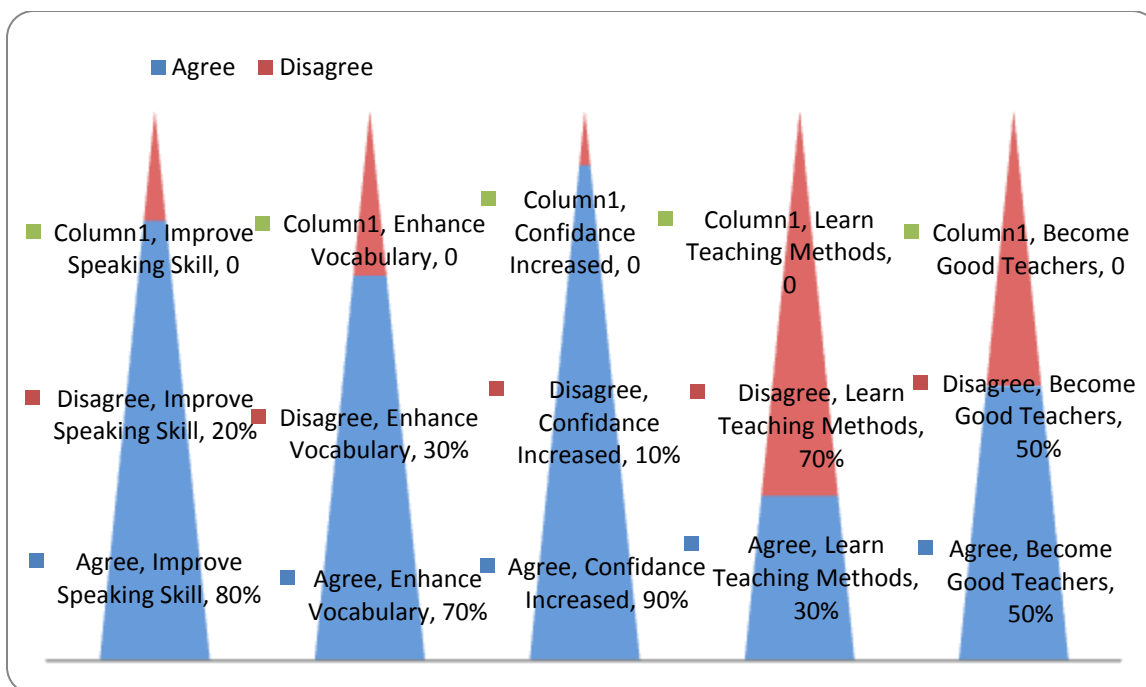
Figure 1: Results of TEFLers' perspectives

80% of the TEFLers agreed that their speaking skill would be improved after completing this DEP whereas 20% disagreed. 70% TEFLers agreed that there would be improvement in their vocabulary whereas 30% disagreed. Almost all the students said that their confidence would be improved. 70% TEFLers did not know that they would learn teaching methodologies through TEFL. However, 50% TEFLers agreed that they would become good teachers after completing this program whereas 50% disagreed.

Findings

The findings of the study showed that TEFLers had wrong perceptions about TEFL program. While taking admission in this program, they did not get proper information about the contents and objectives of the program and developed their own perceptions which were based on wrong assumptions. As their perceptions were wrong so they could not get their required and desired outcomes from DEP and got confused. On becoming confused, they lost their interest in their learning. Hence, the wrong perceptions led them to the wrong outcomes further leading them to greater problems.

Discussion

The current study was started with an investigation about the perspectives of TEFLers regarding distance learning. The main objective of the study was to give a clear cut insight about the

TEFL course which aims at using new strategies for making teaching learning process more interesting and motivating.

From the tabulated data, it is also clear that almost all the TEFLers were agreed that their speaking skills would be improved after completing this Diploma. 70% students said that an improvement would be occurred in their vocabulary while only 30% were disagreed. Almost all the students said that their confidence would be improved. 70 % TEFLers did not know that they would learn teaching methodologies through TEFL.

Moreover, the findings showed that TEFLers had wrong perceptions about TEFL program that is a part of DEP. While taking admission in this program, they do not get proper information about the contents of program and develop their own perceptions which are based on wrong assumptions. As their perceptions are wrong so they cannot get their required and desired outcomes from the DL and get confused. On becoming confused, they lose their interest in their learning. So the wrong perceptions lead them to the wrong conceptions. Due to this mismatch, they have to face greater problems.

The results also draw a vivid picture which indicates that there is an ample scope of distance learning. Regarding the learning environment and teaching method, majority of the students were dissatisfied with the teaching method. They said that the method of teaching was teacher-centered. Majority of the students showed their satisfaction about the assessment that it was timely and helpful. Regarding the course contents, the TEFLers articulated some satisfaction that there is sufficient variety in subject and contents of the said course. So TEFL proved itself a mandatory course for English Language Teachers to boost up their existing teaching and communication skills which is the main characteristics of TEFL. Still the improvement level can be enhanced by introducing such courses for all the teachers in general and the English language teachers in particular.

Conclusion

The result of the study proves that there is a mismatch between the TEFLers' perceptions of DEP and the real content. They do not try to get proper information about the DEP and when they face the reality they become confused. The mentioned discrepancy is harmful because the students lose their interest in the study and just try to finish the course to get the degree. This way, real purpose of the program i.e learning dies. In fact, they are misled by their so called seniors by ensuring them to get through easily even without studying. The students have built a negative image about the university that everything is open for them. Moreover, the market is flooded with

the ready-made assignments, projects, presentations, notes and theses as well. But all their dreams are badly crushed when they find a mismatch between the objectives of the program and their perspectives.

Recommendations

Following recommendations can be beneficial in aligning students' perspectives with the objectives of the program:

1. Workshops must be conducted to create awareness among DL students.
2. Proper information must be provided in the prospectus.
3. In the very first class of DL, tutors must provide clear information about the contents.
4. The teachers should adopt different teaching techniques to motivate the students to attend their classes.
5. The students should be encouraged to use target language in the class.
6. Teachers' behavior should be very friendly & motivating.
7. Although training the learners to learn by themselves is not a new concept yet there should be the revival of interest in helping the learners to take more responsibility of their own learning.
8. Refresher courses for better teacher training should be arranged.
9. The teachers should use interactive techniques while conducting tutorials.
10. Teachers should present their lessons in an interesting and enjoyable way.

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