

STUDY HABITS AND DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS LEARNERS' ATTRIBUTES AND PERCEPTIONS OF EFFECTIVENESS OF GENDER-SENSITIVE AND RESPONSIVE TEXTS AND TUTORIALS OF OPEN SCHOOL OF BANGLADESH OPEN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Open School (OS) of the Bangladesh Open University (BOU) has passed more than an era in imparting school education at par to the formal education using mainly self-learning materials (SLMs) and face-to-face (f2f) tutorial sessions at the weakened near to the learners' place. Both male and female have been the learners of the OS programs named Secondary School Certificate (SSC) for grade-9-10 and Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) for grade 11-12. There have always been questions; do tutors provide a gender-sensitive learning environment -are girls encouraged to answer questions, do the texts present stereotypical images of girls? This paper aims to study on this issue. Selected stakeholders including learners are interviewed as per the objectives of the study. Subject group of this study is learners and tutors and the control group is non-user of OS SLMs. The questionnaires and interviews are taken place based on the various variables inherited in the research questions, and also be matched with the policy and status analysis so as to formulate the framework of gender sensitive and responsive OS programs. In order to study the attributes and perceptions of the learners on the effectiveness of gender sensitive and responsive texts, a questionnaire is developed. A five-point Likert scale of 1 to 5, ranging from 'strongly agree' and 'strongly disagree' as anchoring points are used for main items.

Keywords: SLM, f2f, tutor, learner, gender, learning, stereotype etc.

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh Open University (BOU) offers three pre-University programmes – Junior School Certificate (JSC) for Grade: 6-8, Secondary School Certificate (SSC) for Grade: 9-10 and Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) for Grade: 11-12 (Rahman *et al*, 2010). There may be question- why BOU runs pre-University programmes along with the graduate and post-graduate programmes as core activities.

The answer lies in its prime objective that is to transform the country's vast human resources into an educated and trained workforce, by extending to them a wide range of formal and non-formal academic programmes. BOU started its operation through a project under loan arrangement with the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The project profile describes:

"potential beneficiaries will be the middle and lower class rural youths with primary and secondary levels of education, untrained teachers at primary and secondary schools, rural women including housewives, extension agencies in the field of agriculture, rural development, family planning, health and those

professional groups who upgrade their skills for professional development. The rural disadvantaged youths who have very limited access to conventional education will be the special beneficiaries of the BOU establishment project. The NGOs working in the field of environmental stabilization, health care, skills training, functional literacy etc. will also be the potential target beneficiaries" [ADB, 1993].

Therefore, the Open School (OS) makes the provision available to women in particular and always tries to have the answers the following questions:

- Is the curriculum gender-sensitive?
- Are the SLMs gender-responsive?
- Are the broadcasted audio-video materials representing both genders?
- Are the tutorial sessions gender-friendly?

The last one is very important; former three are normally checked carefully by the OS, but tutorial sessions are conducted by different tutors of different background. Therefore, their attitude may differ from each other what may in turn create trouble to the female learners to stay in the programme up to the completion. Nnaka and Anaekwe (2005) states that development of gender unfriendly creates problems in motivating a particular gender is also able to uncomfoting the other in the sessions. This study addresses overall situation of gender friendliness of tutorial sessions of the OS programmes of the BOU.

OBJECTIVES

The objective of this study is to evaluate gender-friendly behavior of tutors in tutorial sessions of the BOU OS programmes. This also achieves the following objectives:

- To seek out learners' view on using SLM by the tutors at the session are gender friendly or not;
- To analyze the environment of the session room with particular emphasis on the friendliness for both genders;
- To enquire about the supplementary materials what tutors use in the sessions are gender friendly or not; and
- To find out that group works in the tutorials are implemented considering the gender-friendliness atmosphere.

METHODOLOGY

Most of the researches in open and distance learning (ODL) are in the form of popular article where the processes are described. But, presently, the distance education (DE) research has by far been experimental method which involves extensive interviewing of learners.

This research sought to allow the participants' responses defined the nature of the finding through developing themes. Two in-tutorial sessions surveys of BOU OS programmes' learners (N=80) – one at the city and two at the rural area- assesses perceptions and attitudes of learner-tutor interaction with particular emphasis on gender friendliness.

Both quantitative and qualitative approaches and parametric and non-parametric analysis has been used for the current study. The research instrument for the study

is a five-point Likert-type scale questionnaire, titled gender-fairness of tutorial session's questionnaire (Annex A).

The questionnaire was administered to learners at the tutorial sessions. Learners were requested to indicate the extent of their perception of gender-fairness of their tutors on each item. Scoring on the scale was done as follows; strongly agreed (5) agreed (4), undecided (3) disagree (2) and strongly disagree (1) for statements. The researcher also discussed the matter with the learners at tutorial centers who are attended in the tutorial sessions of the programme.

The research was conducted during the participants' second year of study. The questionnaire also incorporated some statements to collect the background information. The background of the OS learners is of very similar in nature (Yeasmin & Murthy, 2010).

Therefore, the sample size has been limited with compare to the large population. It is assumed that because of same culture and socio-economic background of the learners, small sample would represent the large population.

The researcher positioned herself as one of the faculty members of the BOU OS; she is, in any case, conceded to listen to learners' queries up to a certain limit. At the time of interview, it was found that learners were making programme queries related to the research questions right from the onset of the research.

ADMINISTRATION OF THE TUTORIAL SERVICES

BOU's 6 academic schools run nearly 20 programmes and 10 administrative divisions support for successful implementation of these programmes. Amongst the divisions, the Student Support Services (SSS) Division is crucial to programme offer, and it provides a central co-coordinating focus for the 12 Regional Resource Centers (RRCs) each with a Regional Director. RRCs are the local level administrative body of the University. The Director of SSS is the executive head of the RRCs and the University's senior responsible officer for regional matters and is also responsible for the overall co-ordination of RRC administration. 80% works of the RRCs are for OS programmes. It is reported that RRCs do not employ effort for existing non-formal education (NFE) programmes of the University. RRCs are responsible for the quality of the followings:

- Advice on and support services to enquirers, applicants and students;
- Recruitment, development and management of (part-time) tutors;
- The tutorial programme and tutorial centre accommodation;
- Administration of examination centers under the rules specified by the examination regulation;
- Recruitment of external invigilators for the examination centers; and
- Liaison with other educational institutions and other organizations in their region particularly for tutorial programmes, examination centers.

SSS's feedback is very essential in maintaining the gender responsive tutorial sessions for the OS programmes. Because the OS tutors are located throughout the country, and each one is attached to one of the 12 RRCs. The formal responsibility for the appointment of tutors rests with RRC Directors, advised by members by the School. As SSS is the recommending division for tutors' appointments, it has responsibility for implementing University's central policy of gender-responsive and sensitive programmes. In this regards, SSS division recommends the tutors keeping

the ratio of male-female which balances the both gender. There appears to be a largely consistent pattern of bi-weekly face-to-face (f2f) tutorials for all courses for 20 weeks per year, most likely 20 per year per course. Special local practical activities in some courses are also held at the TCs. Female learners usually attend these sessions, sometimes, from 10-15 kilometers far from the centres. They occasionally face eve-teasing or some other humorous problems on the way to the TC. In spite of these, they attend the session. But - why? Do they feel the session gender friendly?

FINDINGS

Founding Vice-Chancellor of BOU, Professor Dr. M. Shamsheer Ali (1994) spoke on a coordinating meeting; where the researcher herself attended, and said women are to be partners in development; therefore, OS programmes should put emphasis on cater to the female learners as much as possible. Suleiman (2004) asserts that gender imbalance in education attainment have been a major reason that contributes to low representation of women in mainstream of economic activities. Therefore, it is paramount important that tutorial sessions of the School has to be gender-sensitive. UNICEF (2011) prescribes for gender-sensitive classroom as follows:

- Promotes gender equality in enrolment and achievement;
- Eliminates gender stereotypes;
- Guarantees girl-friendly facilities, curricula, textbooks, and teaching-learning processes;
- Socializes girls and boys in a non-violent environment; and
- Encourages respect for each others' rights, dignity, and equality.

Class size affected each of these dimensions. BOU uses the local school/colleges for its tutorial centres (TCs) which are connected with good communication and infrastructural well-developed and well-equipped. It also allows only 50 learners for each centre. Therefore, class size is appeared very standard and where there is no problem for male-female sitting arrangement as the mean responses is 2.2 only.

Gender of learners was significant only in the study, with males participating more in the session interaction where the mean responses is 3.32, but this gender difference was not due to tutors' discrimination. Female tutors were more likely to create a participatory climate for all students. Creating a better tutorial support climate for female students creates a better learning environment for all learners.

Table: 1
Learner's Responses on Gender Issues on Texts and Tutorials

Parameters	Percentages of learners' opinion					Mean Responses
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	
73 Tutors use gender-sensitive supplementary materials in the session	4.1	12.3	31.5	34.2	17.8	3.49
76 Tutors use SLMs in the session are gender-responsive	5.3	17.1	35.5	28.9	13.2	3.28
78 Tutors allow male-female friendship for sharing learning	2.6	12.8	33.3	35.9	15.4	3.49

Table 1. (Continued)

76	Tutors put special attention to the boys over the girls only in particular to the feedback	2.6	9.2	19.7	21.1	47.4	4.01
79	Tutors are cooperative and give an equal chance of participation to both genders	7.6	15.2	20.3	20.3	36.7	3.63
76	Female learners sit separately in the tutorial session	42.1	19.7	17.1	13.2	7.9	2.25
73	While doing participatory work in the tutorial session, tutors make group combining member from both genders	5.5	17.8	28.8	31.5	16.4	3.36
77	While presenting group's work, tutors allows equal opportunity to both gender	10.4	15.6	20.8	24.7	28.6	3.45
75	While doing pair works in the tutorial session, tutors make pair consisting male-female	5.3	18.7	20.0	24.0	32.0	3.59
72	Male learners put more feedback than female in the interaction with tutors	11.1	23.6	18.1	16.7	30.6	3.32
73	Humorous situation while attending session	17.8	31.5	23.3	16.4	11.0	2.71

In the research the interactions in the tutorial session was observed and found in relation to the session room behaviors:

- Male learners talk more than female learners in the tutorial;
- Male put forth more control over the topic of conversation in the group study; and
- Male's participation have a tendency to interrupt women's contribution to the session room.

In addition to the academic support, the tutors provide some administrative and social support to the learners. Learners' interactions at the centre are as follows:

- Tutors address male learners more frequently, and use their names;
- Humorous characteristics are more frequently applied to females in the form of fun;
- Humorous treatment with women is offensive; but some female learners expressed that they sometimes are the victims on the way to attending the sessions (mean responses is 2.21). They also reported that tutors are sometimes informed this issues. Teasing is the main problem on the way to the session.

Researcher's observations were as follows:

- Tutors have a propensity to make eye contact more with male learners;
- Slow learners inclines to feel ignored by tutors more often than do fast learners;
- Tutors have a tendency to gesture more often in response to male's questions and interpretation than to female's

Gender-fairness of tutors in TCs of the OS has been found which are, favorably, and appropriately applied to both male and female learners during interaction in the tutorial sessions (mean responses are 4.01). Table 1 above offered answer to the research questions showing the level or quality of perception of male and female students of gender-fairness exhibited by tutors.

In other words, there seems to be no discrimination in the observations or perceptions of the two sexes as regards gender-friendliness of the tutors. This, therefore, implies that the tutors are less discriminatory and ensured gender equality treatments in the tutorial sessions.

Their use of supplementary materials and self-learning materials are also gender-representative because it shows mean responses 3.49 and 3.28 respectfully.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study of the gender friendliness of the BOU OS tutorial sessions attempts to identify what environmental factors are conducive for gender-sensitive and the reasons why these factors have such influence. The key texts from which OS tutors work are gender friendly.

The study revealed that both male and female learners had same level of perception towards the gender- fairness of the tutorial sessions of the Open School programmes. This implies that the tutors give equal treatment to all in tutorial session irrespective of the sex factor. Still there is scope for further development.

It is therefore recommended that more awareness on gender equality and more empowerment should be given to tutorial sessions to enable them promote and uphold gender-fair behaviors during the sessions particularly for participatory approach applied. For this tutors would need the gender training and this will develop their attitude and preference towards gender-friendliness of the tutorial sessions. Future research may be conducted on the issue like: How does one make the classroom gender friendly if the curriculum itself is not gender friendly? Another issue is the legitimacy of the material is often questioned if it is too "man" centered, which can be another study area.

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