

Self-Learning Materials Development: Lessons from an English Language Teacher Education Project in Distance Mode

Lopamudra Kashyap, M.A., Ph.D. Research Scholar
Department of English Language Teaching, Gauhati University
Guwahati 781014
Assam, India
lklahkar@gmail.com

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Abstract

This paper discusses the practical realities of engaging in a Self-Learning Materials (SLMs) development project for distance English Language Teacher Education (ELTEd). In an educational collaboration between the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), Canada and Gauhati University, India one-year project was undertaken, leading to the launch of a distance ELT diploma. The materials developers comprised a group of ELT practitioners, most of whom had ventured into the field of SLM development for the first time. The experience of developing learning materials in an unfamiliar format brought up challenges that had not been factored into the planning of the project. There were specific challenges in the baseline survey for needs analysis, during the training workshops and in the SLM writing phase. These challenges were overcome through trial and error, and through collaborative endeavours at all the various stages of the project. This paper documents the experience of solving the myriad issues that arise in completing such materials development projects, with the hope that it will help future SLM developers prepare adequately for course delivery of ELT programmes through distance mode.

Keywords:

Introduction

The demand for teacher education courses offered through Open and Distance learning (ODL) remains popular with the ever-increasing need of nations to provide quality education in schools, especially in a developing country like India. Echoing this, Dhanarajan (2005, p. xiv) opines that distance learning is one of the options to deliver teacher training quite 'aggressively' in developing nations to reap maximum benefits within a short period of time. Teacher training in distance mode is both cost effective and time saving as it provides the trainee teachers the opportunity to maintain their productivity by pacing their study hours at their own convenience. The National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCFTE), also recognizes the role

of ODL in offering both pre-service and in-service teacher education and as a powerful instrument for providing continued professional support to the teacher practitioner (2009, pp. 16-17). However, preparing an ELTEd programme through distance mode has its share of challenges. Unlike content driven subjects, English Language Teacher Education needs to equip teachers with skills that will enable them to develop learners' language skills in the classroom. An ELTEd programme, therefore, is expected to have a practical pedagogy focus through the learning materials.

This paper discusses the various challenges that developers may encounter during preparation of teaching materials. It reviews the process of Self Learning Materials (SLM) development of an ELTEd programme at Gauhati University in terms of the challenges faced by the materials developers and how they were resolved. It is hoped that this paper will throw some light on issues that might emerge during SLM production and provide practical guidelines to those hoping to implement a similar endeavour.

Developing Learning Materials for the Distance Mode: A Review of Guidelines and Probable Challenges

In this section, we highlight the challenges of developing learning materials for distance education as discussed in the toolkit by COL and Asian Development Bank (ADB). Further we discuss what is suggested to have hassle free distance learning materials development and what can be done to resolve issues that come up during the development process.

As mentioned in the toolkit by COL and ADB, materials in the distance mode can be adopted, adapted or created. In the toolkit, creating original materials has been considered as the most expensive option out of the three. When it comes to challenges it is mentioned that developing materials needs more lead-in time as compared to adopting or adapting materials. The process of materials development may also turn out to be quite stressful as the amount of work required may be underestimated in the beginning. In terms of building capacity and expertise in the field of materials development, it is stated that staff need to be trained and skilled in the area. The adequate resources for materials development should also be readily available for materials developers to work on. Sometimes, after putting a lot of effort, training staff, spending time and money and finally developing the materials, people still may need to be persuaded and convinced about the products' worth (1999, pp. 2-7 - 2-10).

The same toolkit also provides a checklist or a list of criteria which should be kept in mind while developing effective distance learning materials (pp. 2-10 - 2-12). Emphasis is given on the following to make the distance learning materials effective:

- defining learning objectives

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- designing learning materials based on learner needs
- sequencing and segmenting the materials appropriately
- prompting learners' interaction with the materials
- providing feedback wherever applicable
- motivating learners
- helping learners identify their existing knowledge and skills
- guiding learners to apply their existing knowledge and skills in the new context
- selecting appropriate media and medium of instruction
- providing learners with timely and appropriate opportunities to assess themselves on their comprehension of the materials and also to practice applying their newly learnt skills
- making sure that the learners receive their materials on time, have easy accessibility to the materials and can avail learner support services

A smooth and comparatively less challenging distance learning materials development and delivery involves comprehensive planning and management. Melton (2004, pp. 141-144) talks about the necessity of regular meetings between material developers and content specialists to have a planned outline of the materials development process beforehand and to resolve any issues that come up during the process. He states that the whole process of materials development should very much remain a team approach. Content specialists and materials developers must come to a mutual agreement about all the decisions regarding the materials development process. A common framework should be worked out to present the learning materials in a coherent manner. He emphasizes that all the materials developers should be familiar with a reasonable summary of the development process within the outline plans. He adds that materials developers must know what is expected of them at each stage, key dates and deadlines by which products from each stage should be made available for review purposes. During materials development there will be times when earlier ideas will need to be refined. Such refinements will not create an obstacle as long as the course team considers them as logical. At this point Melton mentions that throughout the process of materials development a great deal of informal interactions do take place between course team members which help towards maintaining coherence and sharing ideas.

Developing Self Learning Materials (SLMs) for ELT

The first issue that faces Self Learning Materials development for a pre service teacher education programme is the degree of difference between SLM and traditional classroom-based teacher training materials. SLMs for any programme are specially written or adapted materials with specific course objectives. They are designed in such a way that learners can mostly learn through the mediation of the learning materials in the absence of a teacher. Acknowledging the fact that in a distance learning programme learners 'rely very heavily on **specially prepared teaching materials**' Rowntree (1999, p. 11) states that such materials 'will have been largely

pre-planned, pre-recorded, and pre-packaged.’ (highlight original). A teacher education programme not only introduces a trainee teacher to principles, methodology and theoretical underpinnings, it provides them the opportunity to practice teaching in real life classrooms and may even help them develop their command over the language. In the absence of the physical setting of the classroom and the teacher, SLMs for ELT face several challenges: they must motivate the course takers towards the courses, take into account their background knowledge and experience, present methodology plans, provide a space for implementation of the methodology, reflection and feedback, provide participants with age and culturally appropriate examples, assess their knowledge and finally guide them towards further learning through sources other than the SLMs. SLMs must be capable of performing all these tasks.

Traditional vs SLM for TE

In traditional or conventional teacher training programmes, trainee teachers, both pre-service and in-service, meet regularly in their classroom and most of their learning happens in the presence of a trainer. They get to interact with their trainer and their peers at regular intervals, participate in group discussions, get feedback on classroom activities and clarify their doubts whenever they want to. Further, learners in traditional face-to-face settings spend as much time learning on their own as they do in the classroom. But they have the advantage of clarifying their learning issues with their teachers in the classroom. They do not need to be provided with private study materials created especially for them. Their learning involves using books and journals that already exist (Rowntree,1999).

SLMs for teacher education (TE), on the other hand, are constructed in such a way that learners mostly learn through the mediation of the learning materials, in the absence of a teacher. In the words of Rowntree (1999, p.11), ‘The materials must carry out all the functions a teacher or trainer would carry out in the conventional situation –guiding, motivating, intriguing, expounding, explaining, provoking, reminding, asking questions, discussing alternative answers, appraising each learner’s progress, giving appropriate remedial or enrichment help...and so on.’ According to Choudhary (2018, p. 8), learning through SLMs is like having an invisible teacher built in who effectively facilitates learning in the same way a classroom teacher does in the face to face setting.

The Context of the ELTEd Programme at Gauhati University

In 2013, the Department of ELT, Gauhati University, India in collaboration with Commonwealth of Learning (COL), Canada, initiated a project to develop a one-year diploma in ELT with ICT skills for pre- and in-service teachers of English at the primary level. The duration of the project was one year, during which the department developed the course modules for the distance diploma programme and then launched it through the Institute of Open & Distance

Learning (IDOL), Gauhati University in August 2014 under the name *Diploma in ELT with ICT Skills for Teaching English at the Upper Primary Level*.

The Self Learning Materials (SLMs) for the diploma were developed in a period of eight months from July 2013 to February 2014. This paper discusses the various challenges that the developers encountered during SLM production and how they were resolved.

The SLMs for the diploma were developed in five stages. First, there was a baseline survey to study the needs of the prospective course takers and the prevalent scenario of English Language teaching at the primary level. Then two workshops on Instructional Design and Materials Development took place. Afterwards, the trained workshop participants were engaged in draft module preparation for the diploma. Later, a review workshop was organized whereby module writers received further guidelines to modify their drafts and complete the SLM writing process. Finally, the modules were produced and after being vetted by a COL expert they were ready for the course takers.

In the first of the two workshops to train the prospective module writers, the SLM developers were introduced to the foundational principles of SLM design and the template for the proposed diploma was designed. In the second workshop the structure of the syllabus and the content of each unit were finalized. The SLM developers were divided in five groups and each group was responsible for producing one of the five modules of the proposed diploma. A group leader was also chosen for each group. The group leader was called the module author, responsible for compiling the units produced by the group members, edit them and finalize the modules after doing the necessary modifications.

After the workshops the module writers or SLM developers were allocated a period of two months to produce the drafts of the modules. However, most of the draft units remained incomplete till the time of the review workshop and several materials developers opted out of the process for various reasons. From the original group of 22 materials developers, only 16 lent their services in the end. In the review workshop the syllabus was reviewed and a revised outline for the syllabus was produced. In this workshop the detailed templates of the modules and writer's guidelines had to be redesigned, and a model unit was produced. Each participant was provided with the model unit and the writer's guidelines for reference at the end of the workshop. The module writers continued writing the units and the complete versions of the units were sent for vetting three months after the review workshop, after the deadline for submission was extended.

SLM for ELTEd: Needs Analysis, Challenges, and Lessons

Needs Analysis: The importance of needs analysis of target learners prior to developing SLMs can never be overestimated. In this SLM for ELTEd project, the first step towards meeting

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the objective of producing a learner centered course which would contribute towards improving classroom competence of English teachers at the primary level, was to conduct a baseline survey on stakeholder needs. As observed by Mary Burns (2011, p. 154), learner centered teacher education courses are based on learners' needs which aim at making learning as authentic and relevant as possible. For that, teachers' practical, classroom-based experiences are taken into account in both the design and delivery of the course. For this diploma, data was collected from four groups of stakeholders i.e. teachers, teacher educators, administrators or heads of schools and guardians of students. The survey questionnaires covered areas of existing English language pedagogy and stakeholders' perceptions of the English language needs of primary students and the need for teacher training. The survey was conducted in one urban and one rural district of Assam to get comparative perspectives on two kinds of contexts of English language teaching at the primary level.

Wearing Multiple Hats: During the baseline survey it was realized that the views of the stakeholders are seldom taken into account prior to new education policies, government initiatives or new syllabi. This was attested by the eagerness with which several groups of stakeholders (e.g. guardians & teachers) expressed their opinions during the baseline survey. The data collectors had to wear multiple hats: that of data-collector, counsellor and messenger on multiple occasions, which they had not anticipated during their data collection orientation. For example, during the survey, they had to become listening boards on multiple occasions for teachers and guardians who rarely had an opportunity to have their voices heard. Many guardians of this survey also showed their reluctance in filling the questionnaires as they feared their responses might affect their wards at school. This is a challenge that needs to be factored into pre-project materials development baseline survey and needs analysis. Data collectors there need to be sensitive while approaching guardians with a survey questionnaire relating to their wards' experience at school.

Local Language Challenges: Another learning point that emerged from the baseline survey experience of the project is that it is useful to engage field investigators who speak or are able to communicate in the local language for data collection. For example, in this project, data collection slowed down in some cases in the rural district as most of the investigators were unable to communicate with teachers, administrators and guardians in the local language Bodo, or the target language English. Only one investigator spoke the local language, and he had to translate most of the questions. In some cases, translation also became very difficult.

Fear of Retribution: Most teachers of government institutions are uncomfortable with surveys, especially when they feel it is a government initiative. When they are not convinced of the academic/research intentions behind conducting a survey on their teaching experiences and classroom practices, they are apprehensive that their responses may affect their careers and may

even be used against them. While eliciting data from teachers and teacher educators, therefore, it is important that investigators spend some time explaining the objectives behind the data collection, and also the purpose for which the data will be used.

SLM for ELTEd: Structure

SLM contents are delivered to learners in segments. Learning points are sequenced and framed into sessions with a time interval between every session. These sessions are usually called modules and each module covers several learning points. A cluster of such learning points is usually called a unit. The ELTEd diploma offered by Gauhati University had five modules and they consisted of five units each, except for Module 5, where the fifth unit was a practical unit and there was no written component. It was decided that all the units would have a minimum of four and a maximum of 6 learning points so that learners do not get overwhelmed by the length of a unit. To make all the units consistent and uniform materials developers were provided with a unit template and there were prescribed word limits for every section or subsection in a unit.

Familiarity with Both Concepts and SLM Structure: In the group of the materials developers, except two members (including the coordinator), none of the SLM developers had had any previous experience of developing ODL materials prior to the first workshop. As a result, the potential SLM developers got overwhelmed by the sheer number of new theoretical concepts on ODL they were introduced to, without any previous experience, in the initial training period. To resolve this issue, training methodology was modified to include more experiential learning through group work. During the course of training workshops, it was realized that in projects involving SLM development for pedagogy programmes, it is essential to incorporate participatory pedagogy to enable participants to learn new concepts.

Word Limit and Related Issues: Later while writing the units, some of the materials developers found it quite challenging to stick to the prescribed word limit. Units were either falling short of words and in some cases, inclusion of activities and case studies made it difficult to meet the word limit. Unlike the first two training workshops where the materials developers were working in groups, sharing ideas and availing the opportunity to consult each other, working in isolation in the post workshop period, resulted in such issues for some of the materials developers. This issue was only resolved in the review workshop, when the consultant expert and the coordinator provided detailed module plans and writers' guidelines to materials developers. The module plans had detailed descriptions of what should be included in various sections of the units. The writers' guidelines provided information on the style of writing and described the rationale for including particular sections in a unit. Given below is an example of a part of a unit plan (extracted from a module plan), provided to materials developers after the review workshop. The example depicts how a subsection was planned within a unit.

Unit name and number	Subsection name and number	Writing guidelines
Unit 1.2 Teaching English and teaching other subjects	1.2.3 Developing language skills through content: using other materials	<p>This learning point introduces the concept of</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● using authentic materials ● writing own materials to resemble real life content, such as a page torn out from a diary, a wedding invitation card ● using technology as a source for materials, such as a mobile phone menu <p>Reflective activity: Asking the teacher what kind of materials she uses in the English classroom (then suggesting the different types of materials other than the textbook which can be used in the classroom)</p> <p>CS: A success story of a teacher who used other materials *</p>

*N.B. ‘CS’ stands for case study in the table above.

The outcome of providing the materials developers with the module section and subsection frame and writer’s guidelines was that their workflow was streamlined. Breaking up the content into smaller, manageable information chunks resulted in a clearer focus on the job at hand. The materials developers attested to this in their questionnaires and personal interviews.

SLM for ELTEd: Content

Content Delivery in SLM: In case of a traditional classroom-based course in ELT, textbook content is basically expository. On the other hand, contents of Self learning Materials for a teacher education programme in ELT includes a study guide, activities, feedback, self-assessment, examples, case studies, summaries, related links, audio- video files and so on. An SLM unit begins with an overview of the unit, followed by the objectives of the unit. The overview gives an overall idea about the unit and links the unit to other related units. The objectives make the distant learner aware of what he or she can perform or achieve after completion of the unit. In a way, both the overview and the objectives motivate the learners in the beginning of a unit. Then comes the main body of the unit - the content, constituting the learning points, activities, and case studies that further illustrate the learning points in real life contexts. Unlike face to face TE programmes, however, in SLMs, presenting the learning points and asking the learners to do the activities is not enough. SLMs must incorporate ways in which a teacher in a traditional classroom elicits responses based on their background knowledge or uses some reflective activity in the classroom before presenting new learning points. Unlike a

regular textbook, a unit in an SLM module must include an answer key so that the learners may compare their own responses to questions against possible a 'correct' answer, provide feedback and also include a discussion on why some responses are considered incorrect while others are correct. The learner is taken from what he/she knows and introduced to the unknown, in the process of presenting new learning points. Further, examples or case studies are provided which exemplify the learning points in real contexts. Learning points are also followed by activities. A unit in the SLM mode ends with a summary which recapitulates all the learning points in the unit and also references to other related sources or materials.

Pedagogy Focused SLM: Teacher education programmes need to demonstrate and model suggested pedagogy. The diploma in ELTEd therefore sought to build in pedagogical practices such as activity oriented, self-directed learning, and constructivist learning based on experiential pedagogy. This had to be reflected in every type of input, such as all activities, including reflective activities or for checking learners' understanding. Developing such activities keeping in mind the word limit of the unit, turned out to be a challenging task for the materials developers. Given below is an example of a reflective activity used for motivating the learners - two drafts and the final version of the activity.

The Drafting Process

First draft:

Let us try to choose the correct answer for the following questions. We will understand the situation better if we answer the questions.

1) Why do we teach a language to our students?

Ans. a) To make the students able to use the language in speaking, reading and writing

Or

b) To make the students memorise facts of knowledge from language textbooks as in the case of History/Geography

2) Do all the students of the same level in the whole country speak the same language?

Ans. a) Yes, they speak the same language.

Or

b) No, they have different mother tongues.

3) Does explaining the lesson from a language textbook in the classroom teach the students to use the language in speaking or writing?

a) Yes, explaining the lesson and even translating the lesson into the mother tongue teaches the students how to use the language for speaking and writing.

Or

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b) No, merely explaining and translating the lesson from the language textbook does not help the students. In this way students do not develop their speaking and writing skills in the target language.

In the first draft, the activity was used for checking learners’ understanding of a learning point. After being sent to the module author for reviewing, it was suggested that the activity be used as a reflective activity, reworded and put in a tabular format for economy. The conclusion to the activity and feedback were also missing in the first draft. These shortcomings were also worked upon in the second draft.

Second draft:

In the table below you will find two questions on teaching of English at the Upper Primary level and two statements for each question. Read the questions and the statements and choose the statement you think is correct.

Question	Statement 1	Statement 2
i) Why do people need to teach English at the Upper Primary level?	To make the students able to use the language in speaking, reading, writing and listening	To make the students memorise information from language textbooks as in the case of History/Geography
ii) Do you think explaining and translating the lesson from an English textbook in the classroom teach the students to use the language in speaking or writing?	Yes, explaining the lesson and translating the lesson into the mother tongue teach the students to use the language for speaking and writing.	No, merely explaining and translating the lesson from the language textbook does not help the students. In this way students do not develop their speaking and writing skills in the target language.

Did you choose statement 1 for question i) and statement 2 for question ii)

From this exercise you understand that teaching English at the Upper Primary level is not about:

- making the students memorise information from language textbooks just like History or Geography and
- translating the lesson into the mother tongue to teach speaking and writing in English

When the second draft was submitted for reviewing, no further revisions were sought. However, it was edited and modified further before being transformed into the final version. The final version showed what the activity was missing. The unit where this activity was used as a reflective activity began abruptly without an introduction. In the final version, the module author added an introduction prior to the activity and reworded it to suit the learners' level of understanding.

Final version:

.... In the table below are two questions on learning English at the Upper Primary level and two statements/ for each question. Which statement, according to you, answers the questions?

Question	Statement 1	Statement 2
i) Why do people teach English at the Upper Primary level?	To make the students speak, read, write and listen to English confidently	To make them understand the information in the lesson, just as they learn History or Geography
ii) Is explaining and translating the English a good way to make students develop English?	Yes, explaining the lesson and translating it into the students' mother tongue teaches the students how to improve their English.	No, explaining and translating the lesson from the language textbook may help students understand the contents, but will not develop their English skills.

Statement 1 for question (i) and statement 2 for question (ii) are the appropriate answers; they tell us that teaching English at the Upper Primary level is not about:

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- making the students memorise information from the textbook just like History or Geography, such as answers to comprehension questions given at the end of each lesson
- explaining the ‘meaning’ of the lesson (i.e. paraphrasing the lesson in simpler English or the mother tongue) by assuming that students cannot understand on their own

As this example shows, the module developers struggled with incorporating an appropriate teacher voice and with consistently using an inductive approach to introducing new content.

Case Studies in SLM: SLM developers had faced problems in writing case studies too. Case study is a research methodology format used in social and life sciences. In SLMs inclusion of case studies provides learners a glimpse of pedagogical situations where teaching and learning experiences in real classroom contexts are described, to which the learners can relate. In case of the ELTEd diploma, the case studies had to present narratives of both pre and in-service English language teachers in the upper primary classroom in both urban and rural setting. The SLM developers had to remember that the case studies had to address issues like teachers managing large classrooms, unmotivated students, inadequate teaching learning resources, low proficiency of the teachers themselves and so on. Unlike scientific research projects where actual events are recorded over a period of time in the form of case studies, materials developers did not have access to such events. They had to create realistic situations based on second hand descriptions from other teachers and make these reflect actual practice. It was decided that every unit would consist of two case studies.

Although the materials developers got the opportunity to interact with the data collectors of the baseline survey who had seen and experienced the English teaching and learning scenario at the primary level, many of them were not very familiar with ground level realities in context. As a result, the materials developers found it difficult to put themselves in the shoes of an English language teacher at the upper primary level. Narrating an event related to the teaching learning scenario from the teacher’s perspective, talking about actual problems faced by the teachers and how they were resolved, proved a challenge for some of the module writers. Further, materials developers were suggested to contextualize the case studies and make them realistic. The case studies had to illustrate the learning points for which they were used and provide more information about them rather than merely restating them. Finally, materials developers were asked to consider case studies as stories having a closure and also to exercise gender sensitivity and neutrality.

The materials developers communicated their dilemma to their respective module authors and the problem was discussed during the review workshop too. To resolve the issue, it was decided that during the review workshop the basic structure of all the case studies would be provided, and the materials developers would receive guidance in articulating the case studies. The SLM developers' feedback on their case study development experience reveal that the participatory format in which case study development was conducted during the review workshop was more productive in terms of materials production than working individually. This process helped generate more ideas and it also provided them with the opportunity to have a critical perspective on the drafts.

SLM for ELTEd: Language

While writing SLMs, extra care is taken to present the content in simple and clear language. The effectiveness of SLM delivery depends to a great extent on the language used in the materials, as difficult and ambiguous language may have the adverse effect of de-motivating the learners. Using simple and clear language does not however mean that learners need not be introduced to new vocabulary or terminology. In SLMs, a conversational style is used to present the learning points as this helps to build a rapport between the inbuilt teacher in the SLM and the learner, and new vocabulary is presented in contexts with appropriate meaning markers. (Choudhary, 2018, pp. 22-23)

The results of the baseline survey of the ELTEd project for needs analysis revealed that it may not only be students who need to develop their English language proficiency at the primary level; even teachers and administrators lack proficiency in English. This was established by the sheer number of teachers and administrators who could not write their responses in English or understand the questions on their own. The data collectors had to translate the questionnaires in the mother tongue and help the stakeholders construct their replies in English to fill in the questionnaires. It made the data collection procedure time consuming. Later during materials development too, unit developers were specially advised to keep the language simple and lucid to help the readers. There was even a suggestion to offer the diploma in two languages i.e. in Assamese (the state language of Assam) and English. The suggestion was, however, dropped, as offering the diploma in a language other than English would mean compensating with the quality and objective of the diploma.

Conclusion

On the surface the SLM development process seems strenuous only because it involves long working hours and pressure of meeting deadlines. But the challenges faced during the ELTEd SLM development showed that the process is not only about long working hours and meeting deadlines. Based on the needs of the learners for whom the materials are being designed, the contexts vary and accordingly the challenges too. The data collectors of the baseline survey

had to become listening boards for the stakeholders, there were issues with language for communication and fear of retribution of the stakeholders at times. Data collectors in similar contexts may face such challenges and they can be made aware of such situations during their orientation before data collection. The structure of the SLMs and style of presenting the contents are quite different from developing textbooks for regular courses. It is very important to train the staff well for SLM development and at the same time it should be kept in mind that SLM developers need constant support and guidance from their fellow developers and subject specialists during the writing process. Regular meetings and communication between the SLM developers make meeting deadlines easier and at the same time participatory format contributes towards more idea generation as seen in the results of the review workshop for the ELTEd diploma. Simple and lucid language is a key to develop effective SLMs and it also helps to keep the distance learners motivated. It was something the materials developers had to constantly keep in mind while working on the various modules as the language of the materials had to match the low proficiency level of some of prospective course takers.

In short, SLM development requires an orientation into both content and structure, and SLM development for ELTE has the additional dimension of demonstration of pedagogy. A carefully planned SLM development structure, template and timeline reduces the challenges considerably. A pre-programme orientation to materials developers resolves many of the challenges beforehand, smoothing out differences in writing styles and content presentation.

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