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Students' Voices on Flexible Learning Materials in a Fixed Learning System

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Abstract: *With the variety of faculty, wide range of expertise and the continuous review process involved in producing flexible distance learning materials- the quality of output should not be debated. But there are other issues that should be considered with these learning materials -which range from access to usability. As regards the latter, it was discovered that four faculty members in the school of education in a conventional university, north of Nigeria are so 'glued' to the use of the flexible learning materials, that they are unaware of students voices.. If students' voices have been a challenge to schools and researchers, then there is need to respond to the voice of these students in education and research (Keeffe & Andrew 2015). The study was conducted between September 2015 and May 2016 and data collection by interviewing some of the students/faculty is still on going. The university was selected by purposive and convenience sampling method from a population of 128 universities in Nigeria. One hundred and eight of the students under the tutelage of the faculty interacted with the 20 item validated instrument which were put into five major categories namely: Introduction and objectives, presentation of content, assessment, flow and use of language and the attractiveness of the curriculum materials. The analysis shows that over 70% of the students agree that the logical presentation of the contents into modules/units and the inbuilt assessment have been more helpful in the flexible learning materials than the conventional. On the other hand, the most affected category in this study included the introductory aspect and the language. But if it is true that the introduction to any material indicates either 'to read on or take a break', then there is a great need for developers of these flexible curriculum materials to put in greater effort to arouse interest of the learners who are at a distance. Some of the students' voices were also captured in the open statements on their feelings with the use of these flexible learning materials. Of paramount importance were the feelings expressed on the in-built interactive assessment. Since learning materials make up necessary components in all distance-learning systems, the need for the various sub-sections to be well developed should be emphasized for its sustainability*

Keyword: *Students voices, Fixed learning & Flexible learning.*

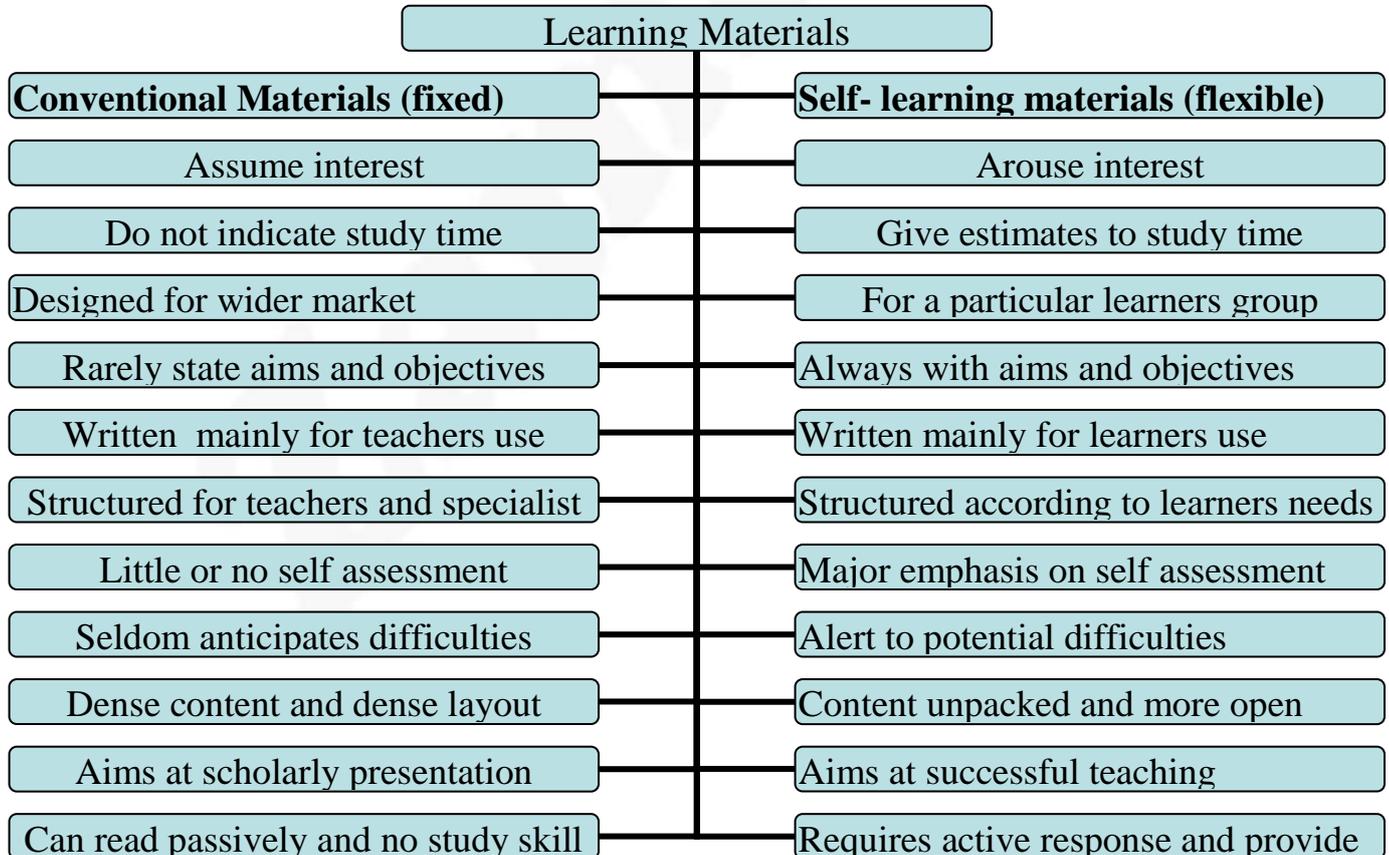
1. Introduction

Many 'conventional' educational institutions over the years have been seeking ways to implement the flexible distance learning because of pressures to widen student access and increase students' share of responsibility for their own learning. (Lewis 1998, Ogunsola-Bandele 2002, Ogunsola-Bandele et al 2007). In a UNESCO document on open and distance learning, Dias (1998) affirms to the increasing international interest in open and distance learning and commended the subsequent expansion of the respective institutions and programmes as the most remarkable development in the field of education and training. According to UNESCO, there seem to be no doubt that open and distance learning is in a process of establishing itself as an integral part of educational delivery systems.

No wonder some institutions in Nigeria have 'opened up' to the dual mode which subsequently led to changes in the development of the curriculum; application of technology and in the use of learning materials. These learning materials and resources make up necessary components in all distance-learning systems. So comprehensive, well-developed materials should greatly stimulate self-learning and influence the quality of the system as a whole. In fact, the development and production of materials is often considered as a sub-system in distance learning institutions. Although existing hard and software materials had been used to some extent, specifically designed learning materials developed for each particular programme should be encouraged since there is a distance between the teacher and the students and the latter is usually isolated and rely heavily on 'self study'.

In line with this, the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) has put in a strong quality control procedure which involves variety of faculty, wide range of expertise and the continuous review process to guarantee quality materials. This should enable the students check their understanding and apply their learning with the quality in place. Also Strides (2006) and Gberoba & Dahunsi (2014) identified major differences between materials used in a conventional fixed system to that used in an open learning flexible system. These differences are outlined in figure 1 below:

Fig. 1- Differences between materials used in conventional and open learning systems



Source: Gberoba & Dahunsi (2014)

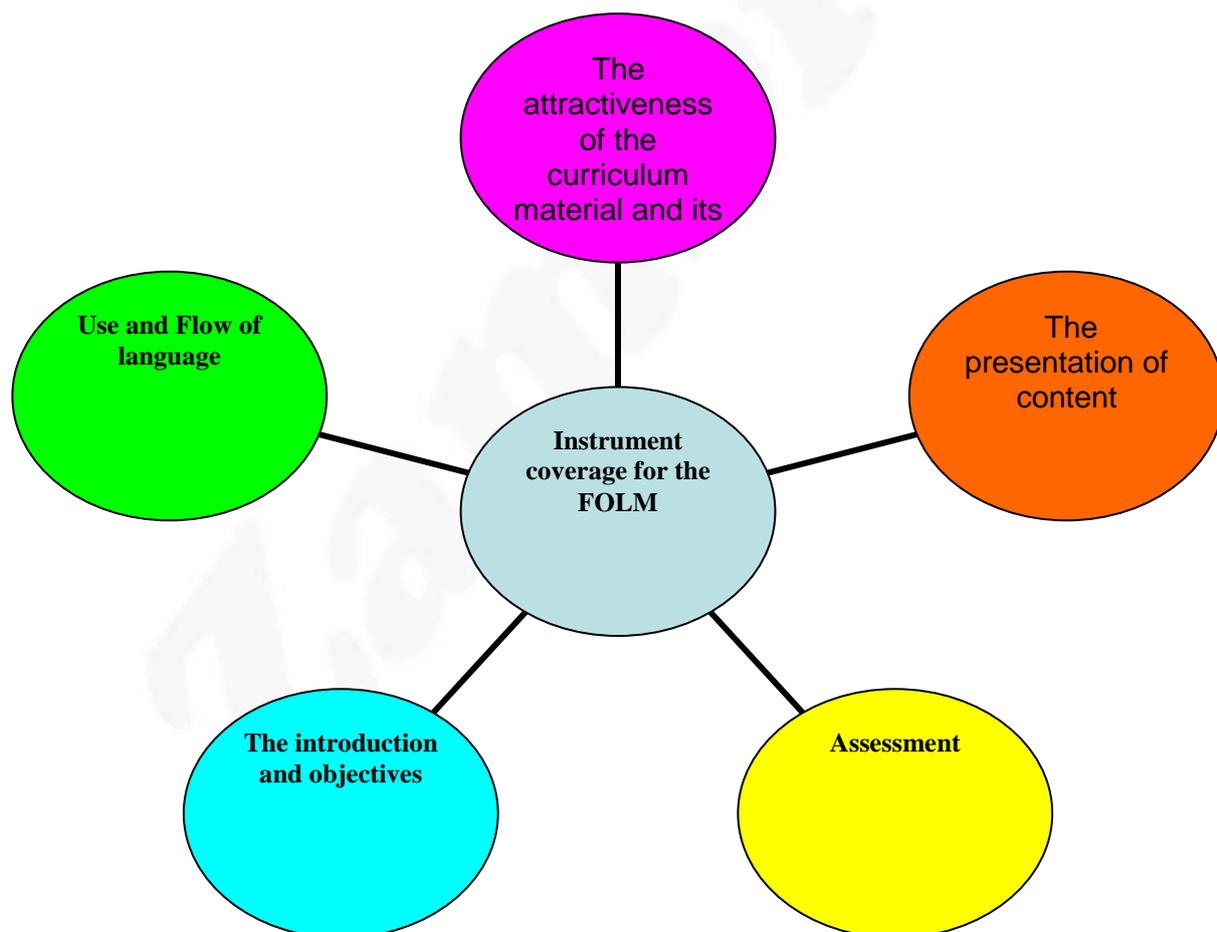
From the diagram and considering the merits of the flexible over the fixed system especially with its great consideration for the learners' interest and need, it is not surprising then to find some faculty members in the conventional universities glued to using the flexible open learning materials (FOLM). The study therefore seeks to find out from the students under their tutelage their reactions. So the overarching question the research aims to explore is:

How do students in a fixed educational system assess/view the learning materials developed for the flexible open learning system?

2. Methodology

The study is a qualitative case study, seeking the opinion of an intact sample of 4 faculty members' and 108 students on the use of the open learning material in a conventional institution. These faculty members and their students are from the science education department in the school of education of a federal university North East Nigeria. The students are in their third year from various programmes with the male students outnumbering the female. The students reacted to a 20 item 3 - scale Likert type questionnaire titled 'students views on the use of the flexible Open learning materials' developed by the researchers and validated by two experts. The instrument was pilot tested and has a test – retest reliability of 0.76. It also provided space for free explicit statements. The instrument covers the following the five major areas as shown in figure 2

Figure 2: Five major categories covered by the Instrument

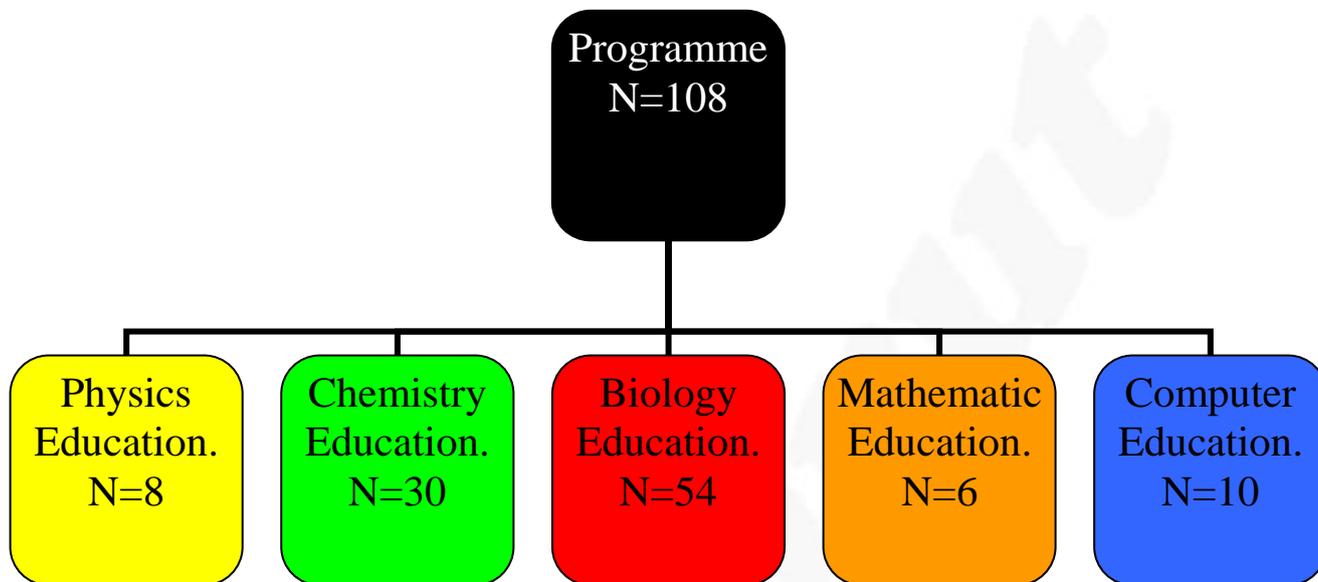


The distributions of the students according to programmes and sex are shown on Table 1. The former is also represented on Figure 3.

Table 1: The distributions of the students according to programmes and sex

Courses	Physics education	Chemistry education	Mathematics education	Biology education	Computer education
Female	2	13	1	26	4
Male	6	17	5	28	6
	8	30	6	54	10

Figure 3: The distributions of the students according to programmes



3. Results and Findings

All the 108 students filled the 20 item questionnaire under five categories (indicated in Figure 2) with four questions each on:

- Assessment which included questions related to the inbuilt self assessment and tutored marked assessment
- The flow of the Introduction and if the objectives are have been well written and attainable
- The attractiveness of the curriculum material in relation to the conventional materials
- The language flow including the use of pronouns and gender friendliness
- The presentation of the content which deals with the clarity and breaking down into units /modules.

The results of the questionnaire response in percentages in the five major areas is shown on Table

2

Table 2: Major Category Analysis of the questionnaire in percentages.

Major areas	Agree	Disagree	Undecided
Introduction/objectives	17(15.7%)	18(16.7%)	73(67.6%)
Content	86 (79.6%)	10(9.3%)	12 (11.1%)
Language	50 (46.3%)	55 (50.9%)	03 (2.8%)
Attractiveness	64 (59.7%)	38(35.0%)	6(5.3%)
Assessment	89 (82.4%)	19(17.6%)	- (0.0%)

The results on table 2, shows the analysis of the major categories in percentages. Over 80% of the students agree that the logical presentation of the contents into modules and units and the inbuilt assessment attracted them to the use of the material 73% of the students were however undecided on the presentation of the introduction/objectives in the flexible learning materials while about half (50.9) disagreed with the use of language in the same materials.

This higher percentage recorded on content had been supported by an earlier study (Ojo et al 2006). It is interesting that some of the students were undecided on the presentation of the introduction and objectives in the open learning materials this needs to be looked into. It is also important to note that while the highest percentage in favor of the open flexible material goes to the Assessment (82.4%) the least percentage was recorded for the introduction and objectives (15.7%). In all the major categories however, less than 20% of the students were undecided with the exception of 'Assessment' where each student took a 'stand' These responses were corroborated by the voices of the students captured from the open statements on the major categories. The names used are pseudonyms;

Content category

Only: 'The material are broken into smaller units making it easier to read'

Twly: 'The material has made it possible for me to learn without constant reference to my course lecturer'

Thly: 'The units and modules are graduated from simple to complex making it fun reading through'

Foly: 'To me the content in all the materials are the same'

Introduction

Fily: 'I cant see any difference between the way the introduction and objectives are stated when compared to other materials used in the class'

Sily: 'Objectives are written in behavioral terms in all materials-so this is no Big Deal'

Sely: 'Not all the introductions are well written'

Assessment

Eily: 'It contains short questions with answers making it easier for me to learn'

Nily: 'My improved performance in last semester result is a reflection on the quality of the new course material'

Tely: 'The material has helped me to have a better CGPA because of the inbuilt continuous TMAS'

Attractiveness

Elly: 'I feel the tutors' presence as I read the Materials'

Tvly: 'Since we started using the material, our interaction with our lecturers have improved a lot especially in asking questions'.

Trly: 'I enjoy going through the new course material. Its so easy to Understand'

Language

Ftly: 'The language makes learning too simple'

Fvly: 'I love the use of personal pronouns within the units. I feel the lecturer talking to me'

Sxly: 'The language is below the university standard'

Svly: 'There is no difference in the use of the language in some of the Materials'

4. Discussions

From the students' expressions/voices, one could see that there are still some areas to be improved upon if the anticipated quality of flexible Open Learning Materials (FOLM) is to be put in place. The most affected category in this study included the introductory aspect and the language. But if it is true that the introduction to any material indicates either 'to read on or take a break', then there is a great need for developers of these curriculum materials to put in greater effort to arouse interest of the learners who are at a distance. It is not surprising however that some students consider the language too simple as the materials were written for the distance learners who are isolated. However for any of the responses to indicate that 'there is no difference in the use of language' is a pointer that some of the

writers may not have been trained in the distance learning mode. This is supported by Okonkwo (2012) research work that identified three major obstacles (the will, skill, hills) associated with the process of developing course materials in NOUN. These obstacles included the lack of commitment, exposure, skills, experience, delay of payment, training, relevant materials, shortage of academic staff, low interest and others. These obstacles could have affected the outputs of experts developing these curriculum materials.

Mcneil (2009) also emphasized that for teachers to plan and enact their instruction, it is important for them to understand students' capabilities with science practices and how to support these students within the practices. So the need for the recruited staff especially from conventional universities to operate within the learning mode of opening up time, place and pace.

The high percentages and good expressions gotten from the students on assessment, content and attractiveness of the materials should be commended. Open learning institutions should further train and empower their faculties so that quality materials that could stand the test of time would be sustained for development of cost-effective, long life learning experiences for the desperate learners.

5. Conclusion & recommendation

The study concluded that there is need to improve on the introduction/ objective section of FOLM and that the simplicity of the language is due to the fact that the material must be made easy for students use. It was recommended, that the writers should make the introduction more attractive to the users.

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