

Action Research on Perceptions, Experiences and Expectations on Alternative Assessments in the Sri Lankan University Context

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Abstract—This action research investigates perceptions, experiences, and expectations regarding alternative assessments among second-year students specializing in Human Resource Management within the Faculty of Commerce and Management Studies at a Sri Lankan university. Amid the challenges posed by the pandemic, the study, implemented for an Advanced English for Commerce and Management Studies course, replaced the conventional final exam with three alternative assessment methods. Conducted with 110 participants, the research employed a mixed-methods approach, distributing questionnaires to all students and conducting interviews with a randomly selected subset of 15 participants. The participants had studied English for one year, and their language proficiency was assessed at CEFR level B2 based on a test taken after their first year. The findings reveal a preference among students for alternative assessments over traditional tests, citing the reduced stress associated with non-traditional evaluation methods. This preference persisted even in the context of the pandemic, underscoring the potential of alternative assessments as a viable option for future implementations. The results of this study hold significance for educational authorities, providing valuable insights to inform decision-making processes regarding assessment methods, especially in times of crisis and beyond.

Keywords—action research, alternative assessments, expectations, experiences, perceptions

Introduction

Assessment is considered one of the crucial, yet controversial factors of the teaching- learning process. Some believe that traditional tests are more effective while others are in favour of alternative assessment tools. Linn (2000) [7] states that though high-stake testing is believed to be the factor behind the educational reform, utilizing high-stake testing as a public benchmark to

measure the quality of education is questionable. Thus, it is essential to consider alternatives and there comes the need for alternative assessments.

Alternative assessments, according to the Indiana University, are carefully designed assessments which can evaluate what students have learned, can motivate them learn better in their own ways, can help them develop their analytical and problem-solving skills, and assess their own understanding of the content that they are learning (2018)[5]. Alternative assessments are helpful for teachers in several ways. They include; 1. providing a true evaluation of what students have learned, 2. allowing teachers to see what students can and cannot do and what they do and do not know, 3. evaluating applied proficiency rather than measuring knowledge. For instance, through the processes associated with an alternative assessment such as creating a portfolio, students can select the best evidence of their learning, reflect on why that particular factor is the best evidence, and create a statement of future learning goals. Consequently, teachers are informed about students' learning and can make choices about subsequent instruction that will benefit them in the future. Simultaneously, this allows teachers to make a diagnosis about students' instructional needs.

In the 21st century, there is a need to reengineer the testing culture and replace the traditional testing with alternative assessments which align with learner needs. For instance, traditional tests require the correct answers from the students whereas alternative assessments require quality products or performance from students along with justifications and decisions. Further, traditional tests are disconnected with the real world whereas alternative assessments are connected to real-world contexts and constraints. They require students to solve real issues. After a traditional test, students are provided with a score. Yet, alternative assessments can be utilized to provide diagnostic feedback. Besides, traditional tests focus on facts and they are isolated of skills whereas alternative assessments involve a range of skills/knowledge in order to solve a problem. For instance, if we ask students to make a research report, it involves several skills such as researching, interviewing, critical thinking, synthesizing, analyzing, writing etc. Considering the learner needs of the present century, thus it is essential to reengineer the testing culture.

Janisch, Liu, and Akrofi (2007) [6] identify three characteristics of alternative assessments and view them as plus points. They are; 1. Alternative assessments take place in the classroom with teachers making choices in the measures used, 2. Alternative assessments are compatible with

the constructivist view of learning whereby there is an impact from the student, the text, and the context on learning outcomes, 3. Alternative assessments predict that learning processes are equal to, if not greater than, the resulting products. Moreover, Hansen (1998) [4] comments that alternative assessments can make students empower. It also makes students more responsible of their learning, empowers them in decision making, and trains them with good feedback practices and collaborative learning. As Wasserstein (1994) and Shepard (2000) mention, “Self-reflection and assessment by students make them more active in and responsible for their learning and make the relationship between teachers and students more collaborative” (p. 224) (as cited in Janisch et al. 2007) [6].

However, when implementing alternative assessments, a teacher may encounter several obstacles such as lack of support from others, the difficulty of transforming students who are accustomed to teacher-centered classrooms, preoccupation with the test scores, and insufficient time. Moreover, in some instances where students are used to traditional classrooms, students are not ready for self-initiative and self-reliance; thus their motivation to engage in alternative assessments may be very low. As solutions, it is essential to introduce these assignments gradually, first by providing them with checklists and rubrics. Teachers can create nonjudgmental, cooperative classrooms where everyone feels welcome and comfortable. Teachers can also guide their students on how to reflect on their performance as well as others’.

During the pandemic, the Sri Lankan university system changed from traditional classrooms to online learning. Teachers were provided ample opportunities to utilize technological tools during the online sessions. With the temporary closure of universities, traditional testing methods were changed into alternative assessments. This action research was conducted at the Sri Lankan university context with the objective of investigating the perceptions and preferences of undergraduates towards alternative assessments during the pandemic. In order to achieve the research objectives, the following research questions were utilized by the researcher.

RQ 1: How do students perceive alternative assessments?

RQ 2: What experiences did students get from doing alternative assessments?

RQ 3: What are students’ expectations from the teacher to improve their learning experience from the alternative assessments?

Methodology

This research employed mixed-method research design that involved 110 participants who followed the compulsory course “Advanced English for Commerce and Management studies” that was offered by the Department of English Language Teaching (DELT) of a Sri Lankan University. The participants were second-year undergraduates of the Faculty of Commerce and Management Studies who were specializing in Human Resources Management. This research was carried as an action research. Action research is defined by Cameron-Jones (1983) [2] as research conducted by practitioners in an effort to better understand and enhance their professional practice. Accordingly, Allwright and Bailey (1991) [1] state that the research focuses on the classroom and only attempts to ascertain what truly occurs within. It approaches classroom interaction as if it were the only thing that was interesting to study.

All of the participants followed a one-year English as a Second Language (ESL) course during their first year. Based on the scores they gained for the certificate course, and with the results gained from a needs analysis, it was assumed that most of them belong to the CEFR level B2. They were considered as independent learners who can understand the main ideas of complex texts on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialization, can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party and can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options. (Council of Europe, 2001)[3]. Moreover, students were provided with a self-assessment grid to assess what they can do bases on the criterion given. Based on these assumptions, this course was designed with the intention of teaching Advanced English to these leaners. The specialty of this course is that this is the first time this course is being taught.

This course was a one semester course which contained seven lessons and carried two credits. Those lessons were; Understanding the Market, Planning a Business, Presentation Skills, Research and Participants, Data Commentary, Passive Voice, and Relative Clauses and Transitional Phrases. According to the course schedule, 50% of the marks should be covered by the assessments and they should obtain 50% from an end semester written paper to get through this course. However, during the pandemic period, it was decided to cover all marks from alternative assessments. Thus, three alternative assessments were designed to assess the students

including a written task, an online presentation, and a mini-research report. The tasks were designed in a way that allow students to research, think critically, evaluate their arguments etc.

Alternative Assessment I

According to the alternative assessment plan developed by the researcher, students were asked select a product that became successful in the market after failing several times. Then, they were instructed to do a small research on that product's history, why it failed, and how it became successful. Finally, they had to write 2-3 paragraphs on the "Padlet" created for you describing that product's journey towards success. This assessment was based on the first and second lessons of the curriculum. The lesson objectives were to analyse mistakes and strategies of market positioning, understand the language and structure used in paragraph writing, and to create well-structured paragraphs. 30 marks were allocated for this assessment and the due date was the second week of the semester (24th, July). After one week of submission, students were asked to provide feedback for their peers. Teacher also involved in providing individual feedback for students.

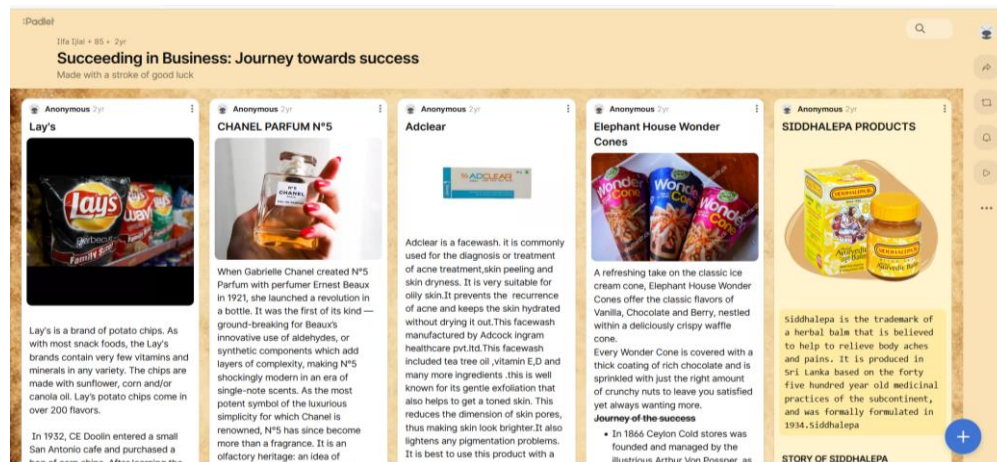


Figure 1

Students' paragraphs on Padlet (<https://padlet.com/ilfaidjal/kkx97cr9b0sfhvku>)[8]

Alternative Assessment II

The second alternative assessment was an online group presentation where students were asked to develop a business plan for a start-up company and present the components of a business plan as a group. This assessment was based on the third and fourth lessons of the curriculum where the lesson objectives were to recognize the main components of a business plan and to develop a business plan for a company. The assessment carried 35 marks and it was

due on the 5th week of the semester (31st July). Other than the teacher's feedback, students were also provided with rubrics and instructed to evaluate their peers' presentations.

Alternative Assessment III

As the third alternative assessment, students were asked to conduct a research to assess the success or failure of a market product and write a mini research report incorporating the findings. This alternative assessment was a group project and was based on the sixth and the seventh lessons of the curriculum where the lesson objectives were to conduct a market research, design interview schedules, transcribe data, code and generate themes out of data, and report research results. The assessment carried 35 marks and it was due on the ninth week of the semester (12th September). Teacher provided feedback for each report after the submission.

After conducting all three alternative assessments, the researcher distributed a questionnaire to the participants and interviewed 15 randomly selected participants in order to obtain their perceptions and expectations on alternative assessments. The questionnaire was consisted of 15 questions regarding students' experience, perceptions, and expectations regarding the alternative assessments. On the other hand, during the interviews, students were asked about all three assessments separately. Finally, they were interviewed about their opinions on alternative assessments as a whole.

Findings and discussion

The findings of the research were divided in to three main parts; findings obtained from the questionnaire and perceptions and experiences on the alternative assessments, and expectations of the students.

A. Findings obtained from the questionnaire

Out of the 110 participants, 63.6% strongly agreed that the assessments were built upon learning outcomes. 30.9% agreed with this.

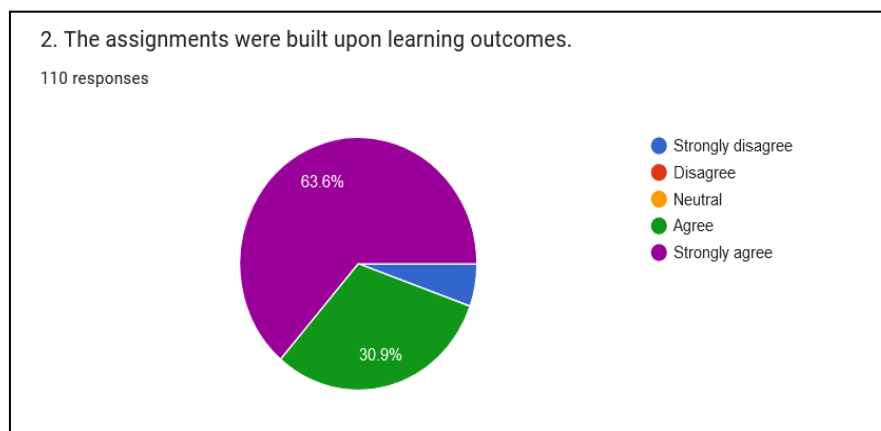


Figure 02

The connection between assessments and learning outcome

For the question whether the assessments had well-defined rubrics for the evaluation, 58.2% strongly agreed. Out of the 110 participants, 37.3% agreed with it. However, 4 participants strongly disagreed with the fact that the assessments had well-defined rubrics. The percentage of this was 3.6%. Out of all the participants, 56.4% strongly agreed that instructions were clear and written in a way that directed students to demonstrate their skills. 41 participants (37.3%) agreed with it. 3 participants were neutral on this whereas 3.6% strongly disagreed.

Moreover, 67.3% of the participants strongly agreed that the teacher had allocated appropriate amount of time for students to complete the tasks. 32 participants (29.1%) agreed with this. 57.3% of the participants strongly agreed that the assessments had challenging, but realistic attainable goals. 42 participants (38.2%) agreed with this. 66.4% strongly agreed that through these assessments, students could grow in their knowledge and abilities. This was 73 participants in number. Simultaneously, 30.9% agreed with it. Yet, two participants strongly disagreed. 66 participants strongly agreed that the assessments provided opportunities for students to discover relevance and connection to real-world contexts. The number of participants who agreed with this is 39. Out of the 110 participants, 65 (59.1%) strongly agreed that the assessments were flexible enough to allow for originality and creativity by students in the product they created. 41 participants agreed with this. The participants were questioned whether the assessments provided opportunity for each student to bring different assets to the work and so invited different ways of demonstrating learning. 54.5% strongly agreed and 42.7% agreed. Finally, when students were

asked whether they prefer alternative assessments rather than traditional tests, the majority of the participants (67.5%) strongly agreed. 31 participants (28.2%) agreed with this. Two participants (1.8%) neither agreed nor disagreed. Yet, 16 participants strongly disagreed and they preferred traditional tests.

B. Perceptions and experiences on alternative assessments

Table 01 below summarizes the recurring ideas from the interviews on the first alternative assessment.

TABLE I
OPINIONS ON THE FIRST ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT

| Participant No. | Opinions |
|------------------------|--|
| 06 | I did not feel like doing an assessment. But this software allowed me and my peers to show off our creativity. Usually, when I get an assessment, I feel nervous. But, this time it didn't happen. We can easily share our answers and read others' answers as well. This improves our writing also. So, I like these kind of assessments. |
| 09 | Padlet is digital and collaborative. I love that our entire class can make edits on this. Everything is done in a visually pleasing way. The most interesting feature is being able to read everyone's posts and giving them comments. This is a good idea for an assessment. |
| 14 | Unlike a traditional test, this assessment was effective. I do not like written assessments. But I enjoyed this. This is a great opportunity for us to learn from each other. We gave comments for our friends after reading their answers. |

The findings suggested that most of the participants preferred alternative assessments over traditional tests.

Moreover, during the interviews, the students informed the following facts regarding the group alternative assessment which was done as market research.

“It was the first time I learned how to do market research. I hope it will be a great help for future work.”

“Learned how to work together as a team. Learned how to do market research correctly.”

I never did this type of assignment in the past. So, this was a new thing for me. Through this, we learned some valuable things. Those are, how to do a research, and also this will be a massive support for our final year. Because we found more information for this assignment. Therefore, we gained lots of things.”

“Could use my spoken ability and logical ability to do the assignment successfully.”

The majority of the participants had gained several new experiences by doing this alternative assessment and they enjoyed working together as teams.

In addition, students mentioned some of their perceptions and experiences as follows regarding the assessment which was to write a business plan for a start-up company.

“The assignment was a bit challenging. But we learned a lot about the business plan for start-ups, such as how to generate business idea that fits the current market conditions, make vision and mission and how to find start-up capital. The assignment was practical and I think we faced those challenges well with the help of our lecturer.”

“We got a lot of knowledge about how to start a business and how to develop it through facing challenges.”

“That was a new experience for me because I had not done assignments like that earlier. Actually, this assignment improved my knowledge as well as the way how to create a successful business plan for a particular business. Also I engaged in this assignment very well and it enhanced my skills of teamwork, unity, and how to work with others very friendly. Actually, this was very important assignment for me.”

“It is a very interesting assignment. We learned a lot from it. Because of that assignment, we gained new friends and gained a lot of knowledge. ”

C. Expectations of the students

During the interviews, the participants stated their expectations regarding alternative assessments. Most of the participants stated that they expect alternative assessments to have practical relevance. They appreciated all three assessments provided to them since the tasks simulate real-world incidents. Besides, they expected clear guidelines, rubrics for marking and feedback for improvement from the teacher’s side. Another expectation of the students was to engage in collaborative tasks which they believed to improve their learning. They also preferred technology-oriented assessments and data suggested that they were interested in doing different types of assessments. They believed traditional tests to be more stressful since they had to study the whole curriculum and memorize everything. Since these alternative assessments were connected to day-to-day lives, they recommended continuing alternative assessments even after the pandemic.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the participants of this study preferred alternative assessments over traditional tests due to several reasons such as lack of stress, collaboration, getting feedback, having a connection with real-world scenarios etc.

However, this action research contains several limitations. First, it focused only on one university and students from one department. Since there are 17 government universities and many private universities in Sri Lanka, more participants can be taken into consideration. Further, some other research tools and assessment methods can be utilized in future research. Finally, in this study, only students' perspectives are taken into consideration while neglecting teachers' perceptions. In future studies, teachers' views can also be taken into consideration.

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