Category: Research Article

A Comparative Study of ESL Learner Perspectives on Assessment and Evaluation Practices with Special Reference to Metropolitan and Peripheral Universities in Sri Lanka

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ARTICLE DETAILS

ABSTRACT

The role played by assessment and evaluation in the ESL educational context are so vital that they help to measure learning progress of students and the effect of pedagogical applications. The attention paid to learner perspectives on assessment has been gaining recognition in the recent years. The purpose of the study is to identify the concerns of learner perspectives on ESL assessment practices in the university sector in Sri Lanka. The study was conducted as a quantitative survey using a questionnaire administered online via Google Form to a population of 685 university students of which 461 were from peripheral universities while 224 were from metropolitan universities. The data analysed through SPSS software revealed that the areas; modes of testing and online testing were found to record moderate and low satisfaction by the respondents. Further, students of peripheral universities had indicated lesser satisfaction compared to students of the metropolitan universities in all the four areas; effect of objectives of testing, effect of flexibility of testing, effect of modes of testing, and effect of online testing. Based on the findings, it is proposed that learner-friendly assessment practices be implemented in the national universities in Sri Lanka. Further studies with university - specific surveys on learner perspectives would be needed for enhanced understanding and ESL programme development.

1. Introduction

Assessment is a key area in education which is used to evaluate and measure learning progress and acquisition of skills of students during the learning process. Further, it can be termed as a systematic evaluation of what students have learnt. Therefore, assessment and evaluation in study programmes help to track progress of students, plan and revise future programmes, and provide useful information for educational programme development. According to [1], assessment is considered to be an important driving component for learning. The strategies of assessment focus on a myriad of aspects of learning which include recall of knowledge, critical thinking, or creative problem solving. Moreover, students become more self-directed learners through effective assessment [2]. Practices on assessment are becoming a growing concern in higher education due to escalating pressure to create "culture evidence" that accounts for learning [3]. It is widely acknowledged that ESL students struggle to showcase precisely the language competencies acquired through study programmes with the help of assessment practices in the system. Hence, assessments provide conducive feedback through the backwash effect towards learning on one side and teaching on the other.

2. The purpose of the study

Concepts, ideas, and proposals on learner-centred teaching have been proposed by ESL scholars [4,5] and the concept of learner-centeredness in assessment has been an area for discussion in ESL studies predominantly in learner-centred curriculum or programme development. In learner-centred curriculum development, special emphasis is laid on the needs assessment based on learner perception. However, there is a dearth of research on learner-

centred ESL curriculum development in the Sri Lankan context.

Moreover, research emphasis placed on assessment and evaluation practices in the curriculum development is very rare in the ESL context. This is more apparent both in the local and global contexts. In keeping with the notion of proposing viable information for ESL programmes of national universities in Sri Lanka, the study aims to identify learner perceptions on selected important areas in assessment and evaluation with special reference to two categories of universities; Metropolitan and Peripheral. Universities which are well developed and located mostly in urban areas are identified as Metropolitan universities while Peripheral universities are the ones which were established sometime after metropolitan universities particularly outside major cities and with comparatively less resources and facilities. It is expected that identification of learner perspectives on assessment and evaluation procedures of the ESL programmes with special reference to types of universities would enlighten us with areas that need special attention in the Sri Lankan university context.

Having these aims in mind, the study tried to answer the following questions:

(1). What difference of attitudes do students of metropolitan and peripheral universities have toward objectives of testing?

(2). What difference of perceptions do students of peripheral universities and metropolitan universities have towards flexibility of testing?

(3). What difference of perceptions do students have for modes of testing practices with special reference to metropolitan and peripheral universities?

(4). Is there a significant difference of student perceptions towards online testing between metropolitan universities and peripheral universities?

3. Literature review

The role played by assessment and evaluation in educational contexts is central and important. In the teaching and learning process, academic staff of schools and universities measure their decisions on grading, i.e., instructional effectiveness based on the degree to which the students have progressed toward and achieved desired learning outcomes [6,7] . Further, as [8] perceive, assessment can be regarded as an important area which contributes to both learning and teaching. It has been proved that assessment plays an important role in stimulating the learning process which helps learners improve their learning [9,10] . The influence of testing in terms of pedagogical and curricular implications has been taken into discussion in educational forums [11]. Tests in the assessment process are vibrant tools of measurement of educational outcomes. The fairness and voice of tests are important that as they can be detrimental affecting students' pride, self-belief, opportunities for future success. Hence, it is fundamental to explore voices of test takers based on their test taking experiences.

It is vital to explore the students' perceptions of important areas of assessment in the ESL context in order that such findings are important in creating a conducive learning and teaching environment in English language teaching programmes through curriculum development and innovation. Some of the important areas pertinent to the literature related to learner perceptions on assessment are discussed in the subsequent sections.

3.1 Purposes of assessment

Assessment can serve a myriad of purposes bringing more insight into both teaching and learning. Some of the noteworthy purposes can be identified as indicated below:

- **Feedback on performance**

Assessments provide information of performance on the part of students. The results obtained will help the students to monitor his/her performance. Thus, it helps students to improve or correct the work and confirm to the required target performance levels.

- **Feedback on students' progress**

Assessment provides feedback to teachers on students' progress enabling teacher to assess how effective the teaching process is. Feedback essentially highlights problematic areas that the students have for the teacher to take remedial actions in subsequent teaching.

- **Records of progress**

Regular assessment activities enable the teacher to maintain records of progress over a long period of time. Keeping records of progress enables the teacher to monitor students' current and future educational needs and helps to determine the award of grades or passes that would lead to final results.

- **Source of motivation**

Properly designed assessments serve as an important source of motivation for both the student and the teacher. Assessment activities reinforce the teacher and student to organize lessons to

align levels required by the criteria of assessment. The results obtained by the student, whether it is positive or negative, could effectively stimulate motivation.

- **Curriculum planning and revisions**

Since assessment is a major section of the curriculum, results obtained from assessments help to plan and revise curricula of educational programmes.

3.2 Learner-centred assessment

ESL assessment practices, available in the respective ESL curricula, have been challenged by educators and ESL scholars due to myriad reasons [12,13]. In line with proposing conducive ESL assessment practices, some ESL experts have proposed learner-centred assessment based on the specific needs of the learner [14,15]. Nunan [16] argued that both teachers and learners need to be involved in evaluation in a learner-centred curriculum. ELT practitioners have urged the need to get the involvement of learners in the assessment and evaluation process in learner-centred curriculum design Nuwan and Dickinson cited in [17]. Identification of learner perspectives and incorporation of learner needs into the ESL curriculum would improve the quality of ESL programmes. In the context of assessment, Gibbs et al. [18] identified important areas under which educational aims of student-centred assessment could be achieved. The areas include; provision of sufficient study time, engagement in productive learning activities, communication of high expectations to students, provision of feedback that is timely, distribution of tasks across topics and over time, use of feedback to promote learning, and the linking of feedback to the purpose and criteria of assessment.

3.3 Flexibility in assessment

Assessments are meant for students as a mode of checking whether they have gained the necessary knowledge, skills, and competencies from a study programme. Since assessments are destined for specific groups of people such as school students, university undergraduates, post-graduate students, or professionals etc., consideration of contextualizing the testing tools is vital. The best practices of implementation of the assessment are subject to the test taker scenario and the testing environment. Designed products of assessments may not be adaptable for all learning environments of the same subject discipline equally, given the diversity of factors such as the culture, needs of learner, learner environment, interests, delivery of assessment, involvement of technology, and benefits etc. There have been

discussions in the literature calling for changes to assessment practices in education that would allow flexibility and provide learners with more control over the assessment process [19,20,21]. As Martin [22] perceives, flexibility assessments allow some elements of choice on the part of the student. Also, student choice in assessment explores the concept of demonstrating learning outcomes [23] where students have the option of showcasing different methods to show their understanding [24].

If the desired learning outcomes are clearly depicted in the assessment criteria, students have the flexibility of using of formats of assessments to meet the outcomes. In the case of traditional assessment format such as the essay or composition, the underlying purpose is for students to demonstrate a comprehensive, well-structured critical argument. A student is able to accomplish this task using a web page, reflective blog or video presentation. It is clear that, for many students, alternative formats may prove a less difficult and more suitable way to evidence their learning [25], particularly for students with disabilities [26], and goes some way to enhancing student equity [27] .

3.4 Modes of testing

Assessments in education vary from informal to formal assessments. Informal assessments are also called authentic or alternative assessments which allow teachers to track the ongoing progress of students regularly. Informal assessments are based on aspects of development or curriculum related to children's learning abilities and they can be in the form of teacher commentary or spoken commentary given during the learning process [28]. The formal assessments can be traced as standardized tests that measure students at a particular point/s in the year. The informal assessments provide continual snapshots where teachers can target students' specific problem areas by adapting modified instruction and intervene earlier in the learning environment. The formal assessments known as ongoing assessments are particularly important for ESL learners. However, standardized tests in ESL context do not usually reflect a true content knowledge or abilities. Yet, informal assessments serve as a more well-rounded picture of students' skills, abilities, and ongoing progress. The standardised tests cannot measure all the components and skills of a study programme given the constrains of time and practicality. However, informal tests can be designed to the needs and expectations of the study programme.

Performance-based assessments and portfolio assessments can be termed as the two commonly used informal assessment methods. Both methods utilize typical classroom activities to measure progress toward curricular goals and activities. Performance-based assessments can employ testing methods such as oral reports, demonstrations, presentations, written assignments and portfolios to gauge academic achievement of students while portfolio assessments are used to assess students in a practical way throughout the entire year. With this method, teachers can systematically collect descriptive records of variety of student work over time that reflects growth toward the achievement of specific curricular activities. As Brown emphasised, informal assessment is occasionally used interchangeably with formative assessments since both the types are the assessments used to aid learning [29].

Formal assessment, on the other hand, is a process of information gathering technique designed to identify and record the knowledge and skills of students and are carried out systematically with the aim of making a conclusion about the progress of students. In formal assessments, a teacher is an important factor who determines the design of such assessments which are appropriate with the learning standards. Further, through formal assessments, students are made aware of their knowledge or understanding or progress of the learning materials used particularly at the end of final examination.

Traditional forms of assessments are the standardised tests and examinations which are mostly limited to pencil-and-paper tests. These types of tests cannot test a variety of skills and pay very little attention to more practical skills. In most examination questions, a student is required to recall or recognise factual knowledge, rather than to synthesize material or apply principles to new situations. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the application of assessment procedures which are different from traditional forms known as non-traditional forms of assessments. This is a paradigm shift from traditional assessments to non-traditional assessments. Portfolios, interviews, journals, project work, and self-or peer assessment are the common forms of non-traditional forms of assessments. Some scholars such as [30], identify non-traditional forms of assessments as alternative assessments. A comprehensive account of literature on alternative assessment procedures has been presented by numerous scholars validating the effect [31,32].

Another concept of assessment is the domain of formative and summative assessments. Similar to informal testing, the goal of formative assessment is to monitor student learning to provide ongoing feedback. The feedback provided will help teachers to improve their teaching and students to improve their learning further. Formative assessments are generally low stakes, meaning that they have low or no point value. Contrary to these, summative assessments are often high-stakes, which indicate having point value. Examples can be identified as midterm examinations, a final project or paper, end-of-term or semester exams, end-of-unit or chapter test, or state assessments. The key function of summative assessment is to gauge, at a particular point in time, student learning relative to content standards.

3.5 Online testing

The widespread move for digitalization of education which includes learning, teaching and assessment has been highlighted by scholars in education. The 21st century fundamental change has been due to changing technologies and globalization [33,34]. Stone is of the view that the widespread of LMS (Learner Management System) in higher education has led to the rapid growth of online tests in the twenty-first century. Experts in the field of education suggest that effectiveness of online tests can be maintained in the context of whole learning experience with other forms of assessment types [36].

In the ICT-based assessment or e-assessment, both of which belong to online testing, tests such as diagnostic, formative and summative forms can be done frequently. Though, technology has crept into assessment in education, some misconceptions exist in the e-assessment and online tests. While, e-assessment can be used to mean broadly any tests where technology is used to enhance and support assessment and feedback activities, online tests specially refer to computer-assisted assessment where the deployment and marking is automated [37,38].

When online tests are conducted with automated marking and feedback, the online system is viewed as highly efficient, reliable, and fast and the tests could cater to large number of students. The capability to create, deploy and manage online tests within an LMS educational platform has reduced the burden of previously done manual work of tests [39]. Further, [40] testify that most of the major textbook publishers such as Cengage Learning, Pearson Education and McGraw-Hill Education have linked online question

banks to their textbooks. The academics can easily select questions from the platform without the burden of creating questions.

The global pandemic has changed the way the globe revolves. The COVID-19 crisis has shown harsh impact on the vulnerabilities and challenges humanity faces. According to [41], 1.5 billion students have been affected due to the closure of schools. The COVID-19 calamity is a devastating phenomenon of the 21st century in terms of the negative impact it has had on our lives. The education sector, like other human life segments, has been affected making the stakeholders such as teachers, parents and students go through colossal challenges. However, education has been through modifications in terms of teaching, learning and testing. This change has set a new precedent for the development of education. Transforming from physical platform to online mode in the education sector has become a salvation. Software applications such as zoom, micro-team, flipping Book, LMS, moodle, google classroom, talentLMS, iTunesu, thinkific and schoology have been introduced to the ICT system to facilitate educational platforms for learning, teaching and assessment.

Online evaluation has become more viable with the two types of forms known as Synchronous and Asynchronous form. In the case of synchronous form, the teacher and the student work together at an arranged time through online application like zoom. Further, communication through telephone can replace the zoom application and evaluation can be done. In the asynchronous form, on the other hand, the teacher and the learner need not interact online in a live manner. Moodle can be used as a tool in which the teacher posts assessment tasks for learners.

At the moment, the COVID-19 pandemic is reshaping the mode of evaluation in the education sector. The shift of learner assessment scales from quantitative to qualitative is an emerging trend [42]. With the new faces of testing, further research on online testing is needed for the calamities and disruptions created by pandemics such as COVID-19.

3.6 Research on students' perspectives on assessment

Literature related to studies on students' perception of assessment practices are very rare in the Sri Lankan context. However, most of the studies done outside Sri Lanka have provided useful insights to the present study. It has been observed that in most of the studies, collection of data was done through questionnaires and structured interviews.

In the study done by [43], on learner perceptions on the inclusion of L2 -English varieties in listening tests, measured test takers' subjective performance of accents used in listening tests for ESL learners. The results revealed that there is a potential for the inclusion of non-native accents into listening tests for adolescent learners. The study of [44] targeted learners' perceptions of assessment strategies in higher education in relation to formative and summative assessments. The results were indicative that learners perceived formative assessment as a critical ingredient for effective learning in higher education. Also, it was further indicated that summative assessment plays an augmenting role in learning. Another similar study done by [45] was a case study of university of Cape Coast, Ghana on students' perception of lecturers' assessments. In the study, it was revealed that students were of the view that assessments in their institution are congruent with their learning activities. Further analysis discovered that assessments in the university, as perceived by the students, failed to reflect the activities of the world of work.

The study focussed on learners' perceptions of online examination done by [46] as a comparative study in Turkey and Kyrgyzstan served two purposes. First, it aimed to investigate students' perceptions of online exams at a state university in Turkey, and at a state university in Kyrgyzstan. Second, the study compared the results. The participants were 370 undergraduate students taking first year courses online. Quantitative data considered learners' perception scores gathered via a survey, whereas qualitative data considered learners' opinions in response to an open-ended question. According to the quantitative analysis, learners' perceptions differed according to gender, major, and prior online course experience variables. In addition, Turkish and Kyrgyz learners differed in that Turkish learners found online less stressful and more reliable and fairer than traditional paper-based when compared with their Kyrgyz counterparts. The qualitative analysis provided important results for future planning in both institutions.

In the Sri Lankan context, the study done by [47] was based on the examination of students' and teachers' perception on School Based Assessment (SBA) practices. The data collected through a questionnaire revealed contradictory findings between students' and teachers' perceptions. Students have viewed SBA as an excessive workload while teachers viewed it as a resource for learning process. The authors have suggested SBA to be flexible for students.

4. Methodology

The current study aimed at identifying the ESL learner perspectives on assessment and evaluation practices in the national university system of Sri Lanka with special reference to metropolitan and peripheral universities. Hence, the research methodology section includes; the research design, participants and sampling, data collection instruments, and data analysis design.

The study was done from July to September in the year 2020, during the height of the Covid 19 Pandemic. The respondents included the 2nd year and 3rd year students studying in the national universities in Sri Lanka. Since the data were obtained through a questionnaire, ethical considerations such as privacy and the identity of respondents were not encouraged. Further, the confidentiality of answers given was guaranteed.

The study was a survey in nature and quantitative research design was adopted in the process. The subjects of the study included 685 respondents out of which 461 were from the peripheral universities and 224 from the metropolitan universities. In the selection of the sample, stratified Random Sampling method was used. Out of the total sixteen national universities, four peripheral universities namely; Rajarata, Wayamba, Sabaragamuwa, and Eastern were selected while for metropolitan universities, Colombo and Kelaniya universities were selected. A questionnaire administered through Google Form was the instrument used to collect data. The questionnaire (Appendix A) contained 20 questions under four main areas of testing; effect of objectives of testing, effect of flexibility of testing, effect of modes of testing, and effect of online testing. The study used a five-point Likert scale to measure variables with values from 1-5 meaning; Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Moderate, Agree, and Strongly Agree respectively. The analysis of data was done with the help of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, IBM Version 21). In order to interpret data, the mean values obtained from the five-point Likert scale, were condensed and assigned values with three scales range. The mean values from 1-2.33 were interpreted as "Low", values from 2.34- 3.67 were taken as "Moderate", and mean values from 3.68-5 were considered as "High".

5. Results and discussion

The quantitative data obtained through the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive analysis and independent samples t-test. In keeping with the aims and objectives, students' perspectives on Assessment and Evaluation with four major variables; the effect of objectives of testing, the effect of flexibility of testing, the effect of modes of testing, and the effect of online testing are discussed in the subsequent tables.

As depicted in Table 1, the respondents of both peripheral and metropolitan universities have indicated mean values; 3.9031 and 4.0789 respectively indicating higher values of perception over the sub variable of objectives of testing. In the case of effect of flexibility of testing, the satisfactory level of perception was moderate in peripheral universities (mean= 3.4776) while in metropolitan universities the respondents had indicated a high mean value of 3.9888. The analysis of data for effect of modes of testing had an indication of moderate mean values with regard to their perception of both peripheral (mean=3.4045) and metropolitan (mean= 3.5042) universities. For the last sub variable of effect of online testing, the students' perception of satisfaction was low in peripheral universities with a mean value of 2.2266 compared to moderate mean value of 3.6183 in metropolitan universities.

5.1 Research questions

The discussion on the four research questions included in the study in section 2 are based on the descriptive group statistics depicted in Table 1 and the results of the independent samples t-test (Table 2). The interpretations of data against each research questions are appended below.

Table 1: Descriptive Group statistics

Group Statistics

	University_type	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Effect_of_objectives_of_testing	peprepheral	461	3.9031	.56657	.03055
	metropolitan	224	4.0789	.62758	.04193
Effect_of_flexibility_of_testing	peprepheral	461	3.4776	.64056	.03454
	metropolitan	224	3.9888	.71333	.04766
Effect_of_modes_of_testing	peprepheral	461	3.4045	.56130	.03026
	metropolitan	224	3.5042	.59884	.04001
Effect_of_online_testing	peprepheral	461	2.2266	.93730	.05054
	metropolitan	224	3.6183	1.10160	.07360

(1). What difference of attitudes do students of metropolitan and peripheral universities have toward objectives of testing?

As per the data given in Table 1, comparative analysis to the sub-variable, the objectives of testing, the respondents of both peripheral and metropolitan universities have indicated a high perception of indication of satisfaction. However, in metropolitan universities (mean= 4.0789), the perception indicated is comparatively higher than the peripheral universities (mean= 3.9031). This is further validated by the statistics in the

independent samples t-test as the t-test sig. value of the variable (.001) <0.05, which indicates a significant difference.

Table 2: Independent samples t-test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Effect_of_objectives_of_testing	Equal variances assumed	7.571	.006	-3.462	566	.001	-.17577	.05077	-.27549	-.07604
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.388	441.638	.001	-.17577	.05188	-.27773	-.07381
Effect_of_flexibility_of_testing	Equal variances assumed	8.978	.003	-3.671	566	.000	-.21122	.05754	-.32424	-.09821
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.589	439.827	.000	-.21122	.05886	-.32690	-.09554
Effect_of_modes_of_testing	Equal variances assumed	1.173	.279	.207	566	.836	.01026	.04949	-.08694	.10746
	Equal variances not assumed			.205	454.438	.838	.01026	.05017	-.08833	.10885
Effect_of_online_testing	Equal variances assumed	13.845	.000	-2.221	566	.027	-.19170	.08631	-.36122	-.02219
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.147	421.855	.032	-.19170	.08928	-.36720	-.01621

(2). What difference of perceptions do students of peripheral universities and metropolitan universities have towards flexibility of testing?

As per the data given in Table 1, for the effect of flexibility of testing, peripheral university students had indicated a moderate satisfaction with a mean value of 3.48 whereas in metropolitan universities the indication of satisfaction is high with a mean value of 3.99. Hence, in metropolitan universities, the perceived satisfaction is higher than peripheral universities. The difference is further validated by the sig. value indicated in the independent samples t-test. The respective sig. value (.000) <0.05, indicates that the mean value difference is significant.

(3). What difference of perceptions do students have for modes of testing practices with special reference to metropolitan and peripheral universities?

The third research question is based on the variable of modes of testing practices in universities. As per the descriptive statistics given in the Table 1, students of both the peripheral and metropolitan universities have indicated a moderate satisfaction with respective mean values of 3.4045 and 3.5042. Although, the mean value of metropolitan universities is higher than the peripheral universities, as per the statistics, in the independent samples t-test, the sig. value indicates a higher value above 0.05. (.838 > 0.05).

Hence, the mean value difference is not validated as significant.

(4). Is there a significant difference of student perceptions towards online testing between metropolitan universities and peripheral universities?

The focus of the last research question is based on the perceptions towards online testing. According to Table 1, the students' perceived satisfaction towards online testing practices of peripheral universities is low with a mean value of 2.23 while the satisfaction of students in metropolitan universities is moderate with a respective mean value of 3.61. This difference if further validated by the independent samples t-test. As per Table 2, the sig. value of the variable of the effect of online testing, is .027. As sig. value (.027) < 0.05, the mean value difference is further validated as significant.

6. Conclusion

The study investigated the perceived satisfaction of assessment practices with selected four sub-variables related to assessment and evaluation in the national university system with special reference to peripheral and metropolitan universities. According to the results, among the four sub-variables, students have indicated either high satisfaction or moderate satisfaction in all the instances except for the effect of online testing by the peripheral universities, which is low in satisfaction. Students have indicated high satisfaction for the effect of objectives of testing, by both the university types and the only other instance where high satisfaction was indicated is the area of 'flexibility of testing'. by metropolitan universities. From the data analysis, it is recommended that universities need to pay special attention to the areas such as modes of testing and online testing as the student perception for the two categories is mostly moderate and low in one instance. It is recommended that university authorities will have to pay special attention to peripheral universities, as the comparative satisfaction in all the instances of the four sub-variables is lower compared to the metropolitan universities.

With regard to modes of testing, university authorities will have to deviate from the traditional modes or modify the traditional assessment practices and introduce alternative methods such as portfolio assessments, continuous assessments as perceived by the respondents. Also, it is recommended that learner-friendly online testing practices will have

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to be implemented paying special attention to all universities in general and peripheral universities in particular.

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