PERCEPTIONS OF *BAHons (HINDI)* UNDERGRADUATES, GRADUATES AND UNIVERSITY TEACHERS ON METHODS OF ASSESSMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Perceptions of students and teachers are pivotal when making revisions to a curriculum or enhancing an educational experience. Responses of recent graduates, undergraduates and university teachers are important in analyzing the learning experiences as students and teachers can provide feedback about levels of satisfaction, motivation, autonomy and expectations regarding the academic experience. Assessment and evaluation are important steps of any educational process to test its performance or outcomes. Assessment for learning, which is known as formative assessment or continuous assessment is conducted during the process of learning. 'The goal of formative assessment is to monitor student learning to provide ongoing feedback that can be used by instructors to improve their teaching and by students to improve their learning' (Eberly Center, n.d.). It allows the students to improve while learning as it can instruct the students to identify their mistakes and overcome their learning difficulties (Saeed, Hafsa & Iqra, 2018). Summative assessment or final assessment is done at the end of the learning process and it gives information about what students have achieved at the end of the study period or teaching/ learning process. It can review what the student has achieved at the end of the study period, relative to Learning Outcomes and other educational standards. It can further be useful in tracking progress of the educational program and for informing stakeholders (National Foundation for Educational Research, n.d). Summative assessment can be a written paper, a final project, a midterm test or a senior recital (Eberly Center, n.d.). Evaluation is a systematic process that is designed to provide information that will help to make a decision about a situation based on a criterion administered by a set of standards. Assessment can be qualitative but evaluation is always quantitative. There are numerous methods of assessment which are used to assess undergraduates but all may not be used within one subject discipline. Therefore, it was planned in this research to get the perceptions only about the methods of assessment which are already in use for evaluation or which can be practiced within a foreign language curriculum. Assessment practices can also have an impact on Learner Autonomy. An autonomous person possesses an individual capability to take decisions and manage own actions. Ability and willingness are two main components of autonomy; ability depends on knowledge and skills whereas willingness depends on motivation and confidence (Littlewood, 1996). According to Littlewood, autonomy can be developed through Foreign Language learning in three domains: as a communicator, a learner and a person. Therefore, choosing proper practices of assessment can encourage Learner Autonomy as well. In addition, Outcome Based Educational approaches have also identified diversity, flexibility and constructivism in assessment as an educational approach when the process of education is aimed at achieving any predefined outcomes (Killen, 2000). Considering student characteristics while determining methods of assessment and evaluation as well as in teaching and learning is another approach identified in Outcome Based Education (Janetius, Mini and Padmanabhan, 2017).

METHODOLOGY

This research tries to find answers for questions: what are the perspectives of students and teachers of the *BAHons (Hindi)* degree program about its educational approaches? and what are the appropriate methods of assessment to be defined in future curriculum revisions? The researcher has opted a viewpoint of pragmatism aiming to contribute to the advancement of language education by identifying appropriate methods of assessment to measure the outcomes of an educational experience while contributing to Learner Autonomy. This research followed

the inductive approach as the specific observation based on the perceptions of the participants can be generalized for Foreign Language learners and teachers. This was conducted using a mixed method design; both quantitative and qualitative techniques were used to analyze data. Research strategy which was mainly used is survey method while open-ended questions were also asked. Questionnaires were designed to collect quantitative as well as qualitative data. Data collection was conducted within the first half of 2020; the time horizon of the study was cross-sectional. Graduates and undergraduates were provided with questionnaires in both English and Sinhala (first language of the majority) for them to choose a preferred language, aiming better comprehension and reception. Survey was done online using Google Forms and the request was made through email, social media and mobile messages. It was not possible to conduct interviews with respondents because of the lockdown due to the global pandemic.

Perceptions of graduates, undergraduates and university teachers of an existing degree program are important when preparing for a curriculum revision or upgrading the educational experience. Therefore, the data collection about methods of assessment was focused on graduates, undergraduates and the university teachers who have been active participants of the existing educational experience.

	Total Number	Reached/ considered	No. of respondents	Percentage of responses
Graduates	Approximately 60	42 (70%)	27	64.3%
Undergraduates	19	19 (100%)	13	68.4%
University teachers	7 (including the researcher)	6	4	66.7%

Indifference towards a study program which is no longer of personal benefit can be a reason of low response rate of graduates. In addition, providing hard copies of questionnaires for undergraduates and university teachers was not possible due to the global pandemic. Feedback from potential university teachers of the *BAHons* degree in Hindi and only the members of the permanent academic staff of the Department of Hindi Studies, University of Kelaniya were taken into consideration as they are familiar with organizational requirements and even benchmarking. The researcher being a practitioner of the *BAHons (Hindi)* degree program offered by the University of Kelaniya as a university teacher, was excluded from the aforementioned sample of permanent university teachers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

First, the graduates of the existing curriculum of the BAHons degree in Hindi offered by the University of Kelaniya which was planned in 2009 and implemented in 2010 were asked about the most suitable method for exam-oriented final assessment: whether it is year-end examinations or end-semester examinations and reasons for their answer were asked as an open-ended question. All the graduates had been assessed and evaluated through year-end examinations throughout their *BAHons (Hindi)* degree program. 66.67% response rate was for the end-semester examinations whereas only 33.33% response rate was recorded for year-end examinations. Hence, most of the graduates said end-semester examinations would be more suitable as the method of exam-oriented final assessment. Their reasons for preference could be identified as flexibility of assessment, opportunities for performance or effectiveness and motivation. Some had chosen year-end semesters as flexible saying that they are less stressful as they '*have plenty of time to study*' (Respondent 1, Graduate survey) and '*it is easy to get ready for the exams*' (Respondent 2, Graduate survey) whereas some had found end-semester exams are less stressful saying that there are '*lots to study, more stress in year-end examinations. If got low marks for one subject, GPA falls lot*' (Respondent 7, Graduate survey) and 's*tudying all for year-end exams is difficult. lot of stress*' (Respondent 12, Graduate survey). Some said year-end

examinations will offer more time to complete lessons and more knowledge could be tested while some said end-semester exams will offer more opportunities so that different and important course units could be included in the study program and it could be mapped with the process of teaching and learning effectively. Some graduates said they are demotivated with year-end examinations saying that in *'first semester we feel lazy because we don't have exams'* (Respondent 7, Graduate survey), therefore, end-semester examinations will engage students effectively in studies with motivation. It was evident by the comments of the graduates that there are both positive and negative perceptions about both the methods. Secondly, when undergraduates were asked about their preference of exam-oriented final assessment, half of the respondents said they prefer end-semester examinations while the other half preferred year-end examinations, the method which is practiced for all the course units of their existing *BAHons (Hindi)* degree program. Undergraduates who preferred end-semester examinations stated that end-semester examinations can reduce the stress of students whereas students become stressed when facing examinations for all the subjects at once. Moreover, they say end-semester examinations will be more effective in engaging students in studies continuously and they can support in achieving the Learning Outcomes of course units, including the dissertation.

> *'When year-end examinations happen, students behave very jobless in the 1ˢᵗ semester and they don't refer the subject seriously. But at the end of year, they are doing 6 credits of subjects without their true effort... So, it will be good whether they have to complete their assignments or half of exam in the 1ˢᵗ semester itself. It will be good to keep students in an academic mind throughout the year. In the final year also, it is a stress to do the dissertation with 5 whole subjects. Because of that I feel like the outcome of the dissertation becomes lower'* (Respondent 1, Undergraduate survey)

Thirdly, university teachers were asked which method is the most suitable method as an exam-oriented final assessment. There also the response rate was 50%-50%. University teachers who said end-semester examinations are more suitable highlighted that end-semester examinations motivate students to be continuously engaged in studies, support the effectiveness of the learning process, reduce stress which can be high when facing assessments for all subjects at the end of the year and they provide more opportunities that *'the student can be assessed several times more than once'* (Respondent 2, university teacher survey). Rephrasing the suitability of end-semester examinations in terms of motivation and effectiveness, one respondent said,

> *'When the examination conducts as a year-end examination there may be an interval period of closely two months for the students without any process of lecture, Continuous Assessment etc. ...there may be a breakage or decrease of the level of continuity and effectiveness of the teaching-learning process...'* (Respondent 1, university teacher survey).

On the other hand, university teachers who said year-end examinations are better, said language learning is a long process and year-end examinations offer more time to practice language. However, one university teacher implied that the suitability of end-semester or year-end examinations depends on the subjects, saying that *'for some course units end semester exams will be ok but for some papers a long process is needed'* (Respondent 4, university teacher survey). The same respondent, mentioning a positive impact of end-semester examinations, stated that *'end semester exams are good to reduce stress of students.'*

Next, the graduates were asked to rate the effectiveness of some selected methods of assessment to assess the competence of an undergraduate through a Likert scale.
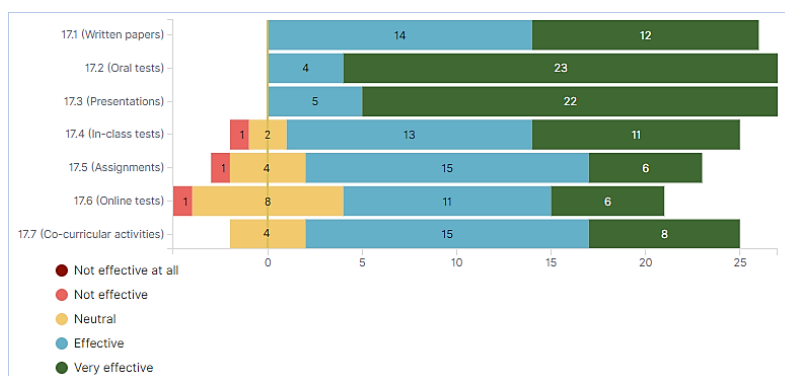
Figure 1: Effectiveness of assessment methods vs. competence- Graduates

According to the figure 1, all graduates considered written papers, oral tests and presentations are effective in assessing undergraduates. Methods of in-class tests, assignments and online tests have obtained mostly positive responses though a few graduates were neutral or considered those methods are not important. All respondents were at least neutral or were positive about co-curricular activities. Similarly, undergraduates were asked about how much they are motivated towards the same set of methods of assessment as. Undergraduates were not asked about the effectiveness of the methods of assessments to assess their competence as they are not experienced enough to analyze the entire assessment and evaluation experience. Their responses about motivation could be analyzed as follows:
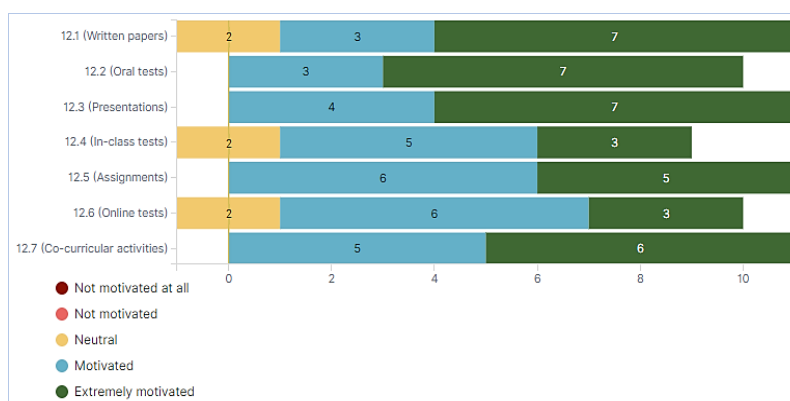

Figure 2: Assessment methods vs. motivation- Undergraduates

According to the figure 2, all undergraduates were at least neutral about all the assessment methods mentioned. All undergraduates were motivated with oral tests, presentations, assignments and co-curricular activities as methods of assessment whereas some were neutral about written papers, in-class tests and online tests, implying that they were neither motivated nor demotivated about those methods. Among them, assessment method of online tests was least rated with '*extremely motivated*' option. Next, university teachers were asked to rate the effectiveness of the same set of assessment methods to assess the competence of an undergraduate.
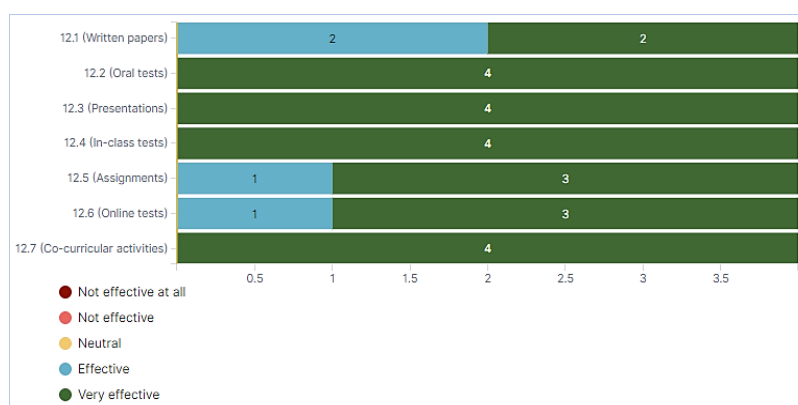
Figure 3: Effectiveness of assessment methods vs. competence- University teachers

According to the figure 3, university teachers believed all the above methods of assessment are effective in assessing the competence of undergraduates. Moreover, oral tests, presentations, in-class tests and co-curricular activities have obtained ratings as '*very effective*'. Therefore, diversity in assessment methods has obtained all positive responses in the point of view of teachers.

After the Likert scale question, graduates were asked to give suggestions for assessment methods to be incorporated to the curriculum to enhance the competence of *BAHons (Hindi)* undergraduates. According to the suggestions of graduates, diversity, flexibility and constructivism in assessment can be identified as main concerns to enhance the competence of undergraduates and to support Learner Autonomy by motivating them. It is evident in comments like,

> *'Please do not add all marks from exams'* (Respondent 7, Graduate survey)
>
> *'Testing memory will not help much, good to use different methods at final exams'* (Respondent 8, Graduate survey)
>
> *'Reduce memory testing exams, increase practical tests'* (Respondent 9, Graduate survey)
>
> *'Written exams are stressful, most of papers only memory testing'* (Respondent 12, Graduate survey)
>
> *'Short assignments, class tests, discuss on errors personally after exams'* (Respondent 15, Graduate survey)
>
> *'Different assessment methods not writing papers for all subjects'* (Respondent 16, Graduate survey)
>
> *'Personally, discuss mistakes after exams'* (Respondent 17, Graduate survey)

In addition, respondent 24 emphasized the need to type the final year dissertation to develop skills in ICT usage and typing which can be useful in the job market in future. The respondent said it is unnecessary to submit the dissertation in handwritten form to test handwriting like it is done at present as the handwriting of students can be tested numerous times in exam papers during four years of time. When university teachers were asked the same question to give their suggestions, continuous assessment, diversity in assessment methods and constructive feedback were highlighted. For instance, the following comment:

> *'Students are at different levels and they are motivated with different ways. So, it is good to use various ways in teaching and assessment'* (Respondent 4, university teacher survey)

implied the need of diverse methods in teaching as well as assessment because the student characteristics have to be taken into consideration when planning to realize Learning Outcomes with all undergraduates of the degree program and when encouraging Learner Autonomy.

CONCLUSIONS/ RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the responses about exam oriented final-assessment, it can be concluded that there are both positive and negative perceptions about both methods of summative assessment: end-semester exams and year-end exams. The researcher suggests flexibility in methods of assessment, which means both the methods will be used appropriately; end-semester examinations can be used for course units when the Learning Outcomes can be achieved within a semester of approximately 15 weeks and year-end examinations can be used for course units which will need 30 weeks or the period of one academic year to achieve the Learning Outcomes. Next, when taking the perceptions of undergraduates into consideration, it can be suggested that a combination of different methods of assessment which are used appropriately to assess students at different subjects would be better to motivate undergraduates. Diversity in assessment methods has obtained all positive responses in the point of view of university teachers as well. Therefore, considering the responses of graduates and university teachers, the researcher suggests using diverse methods of assessments without relying completely on written exams which are mostly theory testing. Similarly, the researcher suggests using methods of assessment like presentations, oral tests, in-class tests, assignments and co-curricular activities appropriately for formative assessment or summative assessment and for evaluation purposes. Summative assessment can be done using any of the above method of assessment along with written papers when written papers are necessary to assess and evaluate undergraduates. It can encourage diversity in methods of assessment. Verbal communication, delivery, leadership, adaptability, networking, research, creativity, organization and time management are some skills which can be assessed through presentations whereas oral tests also help to assess verbal communication, delivery, adaptability, problem solving, networking and social skills. Assignments help to assess research, organization, resilience, information management, problem solving and critical thinking skills of students. Graduates said they prefer short assignments instead of long assignments; therefore, short assignments would be a better method of assessment where it is suitable as long assignments can demotivate undergraduates or make them stressed. Moreover, co-curricular activities can be helpful in assessing practical skills, networking and social skills, problem solving, adaptability, leadership, teamwork, creativity, organizing and stress management of undergraduates and they may be more suitable for formative assessment to improve skills of undergraduates amid the process of learning. Next, online test as a method of assessment has gained mostly positive responses yet it has more mixed reviews when compared to other methods. Thus, it can be concluded that online tests must be conducted with an appropriate mechanism which is effective and practical without increasing the stress of undergraduates as it can have adverse effects on Learner Autonomy. Online tests may be needed in the present and future contexts; therefore, the entire process of education must practice suitable online pedagogical approaches to use online tests for formative assessment or summative assessment. Similarly, considering the perceptions and suggestions of respondents, the researcher suggests constructivism in assessment in addition to the flexibility and diversity in methods of assessment. Constructive feedback after the assessment would encourage undergraduates to improve and to achieve the Learning Outcomes. Lastly, as suggested by university teachers, considering student characteristics in the process of assessment can also be identified as significant as assessment should be planned to improve and assess the competencies of different type of learners.

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ABBREVIATIONS

BAHons: Bachelor of Arts Honors