Enhancing Curriculum Development through Needs Analysis: A Case Study of a Second-Year University English Language Teaching Programme in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the significance of needs analysis in curriculum development, focusing on a second-year university academic program where English is taught as a second language. The research explores the learner and societal aspects involved in needs analysis. This study aims to establish a foundation for curriculum planning by identifying learner needs and interests and to suggest suitable evaluation methods and learning materials. The teaching context is the Department of English Language Teaching at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in a state university, Sri Lanka. The curriculum includes the course content designed for second year undergraduates who follow their major degree program in Sinhala medium. Most of the students are of elementary and intermediate proficiency levels, with very few using English as their first language. The research utilizes Brown's Needs Analysis Approach, including Present Situation Analysis, Target Situation Analysis, Learning Needs Analysis, and Task Analysis. The data collection tools include questionnaires administered online, assessing sixty voluntary participants among students, exploring language skills, proficiency levels, learning styles, challenges, and expectations. The study also considers the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on online teaching and learning. The findings reveal the need for curriculum development, highlighting the necessity of differentiated instruction, real-world language skills, learner-centered teaching methods, and modern assessment strategies. The paper concludes with recommendations to improve the curriculum based on the identified needs and preferences of the learners.

1. Introduction

1.1 Literature Review

Needs analysis is identified as a vital component of curriculum development which is conducted to find out the learner needs and wants. Conducting needs analysis was prevalent in the field of applied linguistics from the 1960s. (Stufflebeam et al., 1985). Needs analysis involves both the learner and societal aspects such as the learner's capabilities, aptitudes, learning potential, motivation, needs, interests, and values. (Balatska et al., 2020). Furthermore, needs analysis establishes a foundation of assumptions regarding the emotional, political, cultural, religious, and geographical conditions within a country. This information aids curriculum planners in setting objectives, structuring learning materials, and suggesting suitable evaluation methods. (Kosaimov et al., 2022) These analyses can be conducted via several methods such as interviews, participant observation and questionnaires. (Brown, 2009)

Even though the scope of research related to needs analysis is not extensive, an increasing number of needs analyses on the following research area; *English as a foreign and/or second language* can be found in recent times. These analyses tend to address the needs of non-native learners, the employers' perception of workplace English language needs and the gap between that perception and the level of the undergraduates etc. (Hou et al., 2016).

Some researchers argue that reconceptualization is necessary for the accommodation of language-learning instruction to the local needs within discourse communities. (Albassri, 2016) The students' linguistic capacity, their other academic needs as well as language backgrounds and preferences should be taken into account when carrying out a needs analysis (Kosimov, 2021).

The English language needs of a set of students in Kuwait University's College of Petroleum were investigated using a needs analysis with specific reference to faculty perceptions on students' language needs and on the relative importance of skills and sub-skills and English language proficiency (Basturkmen, 1998). Another study concerning the views of graduate students at a public university in northwestern China on their perceptions of their English classes as well as the problems they encountered with academic speaking, listening, reading, and writing revealed that productive skills were rated as more important than receptive skills. Over 82% of the comments on their English classes were negative which led the researchers to arrive at several pedagogical implications for curriculum design (Song, Y et al., 2022).

The students' desire for autonomy in learning, their preferences for technology and visual materials, as well as interactive assessment methods were revealed from a needs analysis carried out at the university in Ankara, Turkey. The recommendations of the research included incorporating MOODLE, visual materials, increasing active participation of the students as well as introducing group projects as one form of assessment (Ürün et al.,, 2015).

A questionnaire survey conducted at the University of Bengkulu revealed that the students prefer story-based learning approaches, a blend of the deductive and the inductive approach as well as a friendly learning atmosphere. Whilst the learners require a strong support system, they also expect room for individual learning process (Yunita et al., 2018).

Another study which analyzed the course material of second language learners to check whether it effectively meets their language needs with special reference to writing competence, brought out the fact that the students found writing to be most difficult

compared to listening, speaking and reading (Baig, 2012).

The findings of another study conducted in Jordan, focused more on the need of motivating students and using English to build their personality and self-esteem via language teaching. As the motivation factor was identified as a lack, it was recommended that curriculum designers ought to develop the lesson material in a way that boosts the learners' personality and self-esteem (Albakrawi, 2013).

A study which was carried out in Lebanon, unraveled some discrepancies between the curriculum and student requirements. The respondents identified a deficiency in the curriculum, claiming that the syllabus lacked practical activities. The teaching methods were identified to be outdated as more of an exam-oriented teaching process was present in the prevailing system. The recommendations of this research put forth the idea of integrating technology into teaching while incorporating more exposure to language instead of dwelling heavily on teacher-centered learning. It was decided that critical thinking and interactive learning should also be promoted, and learner-centered learning process should be implemented (Aljaafil et al., 2023).

Shabaan and Ghaith (1997) who altered the 1997 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) curriculum for Lebanon, introduced a novel plan for curriculum development. Their focus was on developing a thematic content-based model. It included an integrated instructional approach centered around meaningful themes to address communicative, social, and academic objectives. The curriculum was designed to improve the fundamental language skills of the learners such as listening, reading, writing, speaking as well as critical thinking and cultural awareness. Their approach was largely an interdisciplinary approach referring to different thematic units. They also altered the

testing formats in foreign language education (Shaaban et al., 1997).

Another research which investigated the educational requirements of the learners in secondary schools in Saudi Arabia, focused largely on students' professional needs and preferred learning and teaching methods. The findings revealed that the students desire to communicate fluently and effortlessly while honing the capability to secure employment in future. Also, they preferred a more student oriented and interactive classroom environment with pair and group work without merely being limited to individual learning. The research also revealed a lack of consideration for learners' differences in terms of language proficiency and socio-cultural diversities; hence some of the students were demotivated by not being able to keep up with their classmates. This study thus recommended that teachers and schools ought to regularly conduct needs analysis to update the curriculum to investigate the needs of the students (Al-Hamlan et al., 2015).

Identifying the scarcity of needs analysis in Sri Lankan context, a study was conducted to examine the needs of English language learners concerning a compulsory English program at Sabaragamuwa university in Sri Lanka for a textbook amendment. This survey which involved first and second year students who follow the Core English Language (CEL) program conducted by the Department of English language Teaching, revealed that explicit grammar teaching was addressed negatively by most learners. Their interest revolves around speaking and listening activities based on real-life contexts. Also, the learners' preference was for an inductive teaching approach rather than a deductive approach of teaching. The conclusions of the study assert that authentic material related to real life ought to be included in the curriculum to increase the motivation of the students (Basnayake, 2020).

Thus, it is evident that there is ample research on analyzing needs, and wants of the students who learn English as a second language which can cater to effective development of the curriculum, assessment, and evaluation processes. Yet, a research gap was identified; hence there is a comparative dearth of needs analyses conducted in the Sri Lankan context. To bridge this gap, this research was conducted in relation to the curriculum development of a second-year university academic program where English is taught as a second language.

1.2. The Teaching Context of the Research

The teaching context is a DELT – Department of English Language Teaching at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in a state university in Sri Lanka. This university is one of the leading government universities in the country. Being one of the first universities of independent Sri Lanka; its history roots back to the initiation of English education in Ceylon.

The Department of English Language Teaching of this university offers service approximately to four faculties: including Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences and Faculty of Applied Sciences etc.

The major courses taught in the faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences are as follows.

- English for First Year – First Semester - Credit Bearing Course
- English for First Year– Second Semester - Credit Bearing Course
- English for Second Year (English Medium) – First Semester – Credit Bearing Course
- English for Second Year (English Medium) – Second Semester – Credit Bearing Course
- English for Second Year (Sinhala Medium) – First Semester – Credit Bearing Course
- English for Second Year (Sinhala Medium) – Second Semester – Credit Bearing Course
- English for Third Year – First Semester Credit Bearing Course

This needs analysis is carried out for the second-year academic programs in the faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. This is a general English course which caters to all the students in the faculty who follow their degree in Sinhala medium: their mother tongue. In these academic programs, lectures are held once a week, creating twenty-eight teaching hours per semester. The second-year students are taught English 56 hours per academic year. As the students who follow their degree in Sinhala medium of the whole batch taking this course, the students are divided into thirteen classes consisting of approximately fifty students. Each of these classes are handled by one lecturer for both semesters. Thus, these Sinhala medium students receive input of English throughout their academic year.

Thus, the teaching level is undergraduate level whereas the learner level can be generally identified as intermediate. There are students of different competence levels. Yet, the majority can be identified as learners of elementary and intermediate capability.

The purpose of the course is to assist 'the second-year undergraduates to acquire the required skills in the English language to enable them to pursue their studies and use the target language expressions related to their immediate social contexts.' The overall aim is to create 'an anxiety free, active language learning atmosphere' which would encourage the students to learn English as their second language.

Each lesson in the course book is divided into different parts to maximize the effect of learning on the students. These lessons let the students brainstorm previously acquired knowledge of language at the initiating stage.

Then the lesson is focused on listening and reading whilst some activities are utilized to hone their four language skills: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. Altogether, one lesson includes up to 5-6 tasks, proving the fact that the course has a task-based approach. Additionally, there is a grammar revision and a speaking component at the end of each lesson.

This course is specifically selected for the needs analysis as assessing the language needs of the students who follow the degree in Sinhala medium in the university is highly significant in improving the general competency of English. The proficiency level, prior knowledge, and exposure to the language of these students are naturally going to be different from each other as they come from diverse backgrounds. Owing to these differences, language instruction and the lesson material ought to be graded according to their level. This can be achieved via conscientious consideration of the diverse requirements of individual learners.

On the other hand, getting to know about the wants and lacks with reference to the content of the syllabus from the second year Sinhala medium students is important in developing the content of the third-year syllabus as well. Further, the manner of conducting continuous assessments and final examinations can be altered, improved, and implemented according to the requirements of the students.

The specific objectives of this study aim to establish a foundation for curriculum planning by identifying learner needs and to suggest suitable evaluation methods and learning materials. Thus, to achieve these specific objectives, needs analysis is immensely important in meeting rather realistic objectives while developing effective lesson material as well as assessment and evaluation criteria, taking the needs, and wants of the target group of students into consideration.

Building on previous studies that highlight the importance of needs analysis in curriculum development, this research further explores the specific needs of the target group. Previous research has consistently emphasized the need for curriculum adaptation to align with learners' interests, proficiency levels, and real-world skills. By employing a comprehensive needs analysis approach, the findings of this study underscore the necessity for curriculum development that not only addresses academic requirements but also fosters motivation and engagement among students. This alignment with established research, coupled with insights into the unique challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, positions this study to offer valuable recommendations for enhancing the English language curriculum, ensuring it meets the evolving needs of learners and enhances their academic and practical language skills.

2. Materials and Methods

This needs analysis was conducted to assess the language requirements of the second-year undergraduate students who follow their degree in Sinhala medium and learn English as a second language at a state university in Sri Lanka. The initial stage of the analysis, data collection tools and their administration will be discussed followed by a description of how Brown's needs analysis was incorporated to conduct this needs analysis.

The research design employs mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches. The study utilizes Brown's Needs Analysis Approach, which includes Present Situation Analysis, Target Situation Analysis, Learning Needs Analysis, and Task Analysis, to thoroughly investigate the current curriculum and identify areas for improvement. Data collection is conducted through online questionnaires, targeting sixty voluntary student participants to gather information on their language skills,

proficiency levels, learning styles, challenges, and expectations. Additionally, the research examines the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on online teaching and learning.

The primary research problem is to explore how efficient is needs analysis to investigate the inadequate alignment of the current English language curriculum with the needs and interests of second-year university students who follow their major degree program in Sinhala medium. Other research questions incorporated are, what challenges students face in the existing English language curriculum, particularly in the context of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Other questions are, what the target language needs of students for academic and professional success are and how the current English language curriculum can be improved to better meet the identified needs and preferences of students.

The initial stage contains the objectives of the analysis, including exploring the essential needs, desired wants and personal-professional goals of the students, as well as the factors lacking in the curriculum, while observing the language proficiency of the learners. Altering the instruction, assessment and evaluation process was also taken into consideration via the data collected from 60 voluntary key informants who follow this particular second year English language program.

In terms of data collection tools, stratified systematic sampling method was utilized as the sample population is heterogeneous. Questionnaires were utilized to gather data from the students. The questionnaire survey contained questions related to four language skills, their language proficiency, the learning styles they prefer, their areas of difficulty, and the desired expectations from the syllabus etc. In administering these questionnaires, the questionaires were distributed online to 60 students as these students were not physically present in the university premises at the time of data collection. Instructions was provided in simple English to assure the clarity of the understanding. Two weeks were provided before the deadline for the students to fill out the questionaries.

Brown's Needs Analysis Approach was also utilized to carry out the needs analysis referring to its several components. Present Situation Analysis was used to measure the present language proficiency levels of the students as well as to locate the gaps between those levels and the target level. Then, through Target Situation Analysis, the linguistic skills the students will require in their personal, academic, and professional goals were taken into consideration. Under Learning Needs Analysis, the learning styles the students prefer, their expectations and the difficult areas for them were investigated. Under Task Analysis, the learners' responses to tasks related to four language skills were analyzed, leading to the stage of curriculum development whilst catering to introducing realistic learning objectives, assessment, and evaluation methods. The questionnaire which was distributed among the key informants is provided as the appendix.

3.Results and Discussion

The analysis revealed that the language proficiency of the students varies across diverse levels starting from beginner to native-like proficiency. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the distribution of students across different proficiency levels.

According to Figure 1, it is evident that the majority of the students are at beginner level whereas the second most can be identified as learners of intermediate level. There is a very limited number of advanced and native like users of English among the sample.
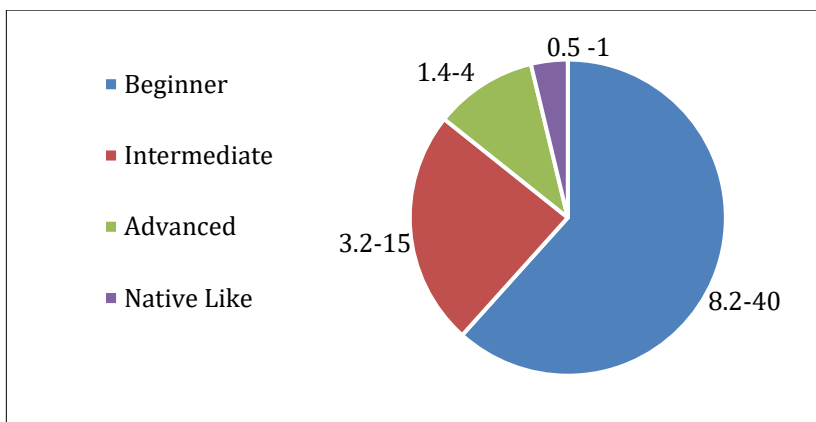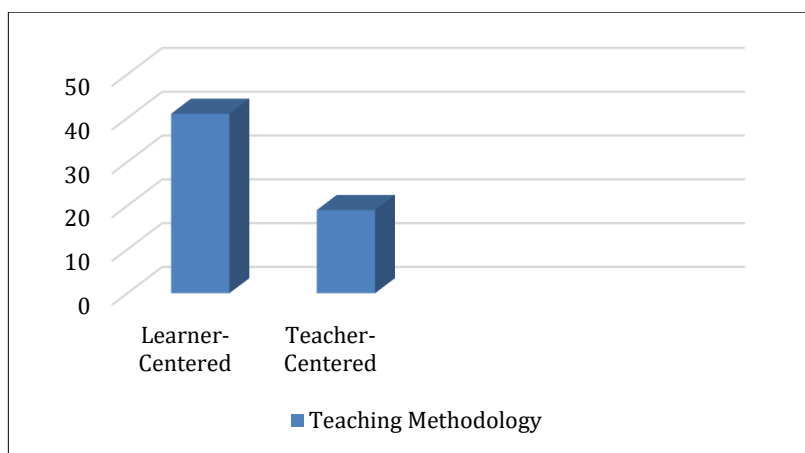
Figure 01. Distribution of Proficiency Level

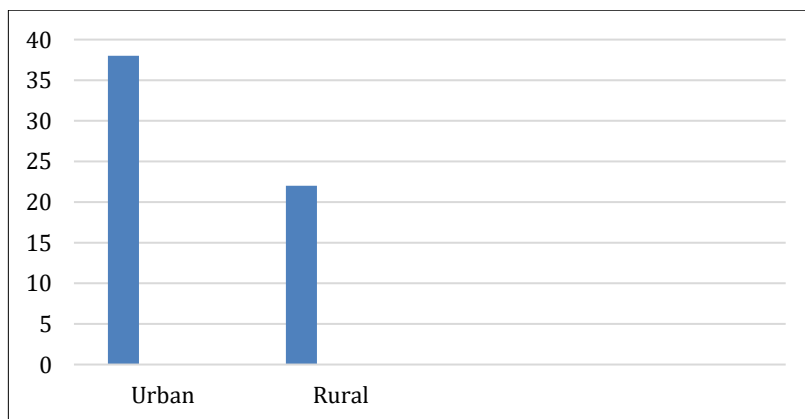**Figure 02.** Preference on Teaching Methodology

Figure 03. Preference on Online teaching

This can be analyzed according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Thus, the learners at the beginner level can be identified as A1 and A2 learners. Intermediate level corresponds to B1 and B2 levels in the framework whereas the four students who have advanced proficiency belong to the C1 level. There is only one student with C2 proficiency among the students who were taken as the sample for the needs analysis. (British Council, n.d.)

In terms of the goals of the learners, it was revealed that the learners require language skills for personal, academic, and professional goals. *English communication skills* have been identified as a significant workplace tool for success in occupational world. (Hynes & Bhatia, 1996) In this needs analysis, it turns out that most students perceive English as a steppingstone to the path of advancing their academic strength and future careers.

The responses regarding the learning styles revealed that forty-one students prefer a learner-centered teaching method whereas nineteen students liked a teacher-centered method as shown in the figure as follows.

This manifests the fact that the students prefer a learner centered classroom over a teacher-centered learning environment. According to research, (Badjadi, 2020) adaptation of learner-centered education has become prominent in second language teaching in university contexts causing a notable shift in language education.

The needs analysis also revealed the difficulties students encountered when learning English as their second language. It is imperative that those factors like 'fear, hesitation, and limited vocabulary; are some of the challenges faced by ESL learners all over the world. (Ying, Siang, & Mohamad, 2021) The students have found the spoken component to be rather difficult, directing the research towards second language anxiety as

well. The instances of the linguistic malady Schizoglossia (Haugen & Firchow, 1972) could be identified among these students as the results manifested a linguistic insecurity and an inferiority about their native language. Xenoglossophobia or the foreign language anxiety (Psych times, 2023) could also be perceived as the responses of the students under the difficulties they encountered while learning English largely revealed an unease and nervousness in handling the language.

Also, there were comments on difficulties in reading when they engaged with advanced texts. In terms of listening, some students have identified the pronunciation of the foreigners which were utilized in listening tasks as rather difficult to understand. Writing was not identified as a difficult area by most of them, yet some have referred to challenges in writing grammatically correct sentences. Grammar, specifically, tenses, reported speech and relative clauses were pointed out as rather difficult areas of language.

It should be noted that online teaching, learning and assessment have increased during the Covid pandemic period and have continued due to the convenience of utilization up to the present times. As it can be posited from figure 3, the students from city areas have positioned online platform as an effective and progressive method, whereas most respondents from rural areas have identified online platform, specially, the assessment system to be a failure as there can be several difficulties arriving due to the dearth of adequate technological facilities.

Among the suggested topics for the curriculum which are lacking in the curriculum include comics, nature, folk tales, Children's stories, news on celebrity and sports. It should be noted that in a study conducted in the Sabaragamuwa university of Sri Lanka, which was mentioned earlier as well, (Basnayake, 2020), the students have stated their preference on the inclusion of

fairy tales, news as well as details about famous people. Further, the respondents have come up with various suggestions on curriculum, assessment, and evaluation. Some have identified the lesson as somewhat distanced from Sri Lankan culture and suggested having rather socio-culturally related content for texts.

According to some researchers, (Al-Bashir et.al,2016) it is immensely important to provide feedback to accelerate the learning experience. Proving this point, another suggestion given by the students was to incorporate individual teacher feedback for language lessons instead of carrying out the lesson with mere common instruction. Also, day to day teacher feedback were expected by some of the leaners, stating that it would pave the way for them to improve their English language competence in a more effective manner.

There was some constructive feedback for assessment methods as well. Some researchers argue that the traditional testing culture is largely influenced by old paradigms, including behaviorist learning theory and standardized testing (Shepard 2000). In this recent study, most students have shown their preference for interview and presentation forms of assessments that can be assisted in developing their personality as well as communication skills. Also, there was one comment which identified written assessments as a restricted and conventional option, thereby favoring oral and presentation-based assessments.

Research findings reveal that students' perceptions about assessment largely influence their approaches to learning and studying. Also, the students tend to hold strong perceptions on different assessment and evaluation methods. According to the studies conducted in different parts of the world, the learners tend to favor multiple-choice format exams over essay type questions. Further, they tend to be aware of

the fair exploitation of the evaluation modes as well. (Struyven, Dochy, & Janssens, 2005) Likewise, evaluation criteria have also received both positive and negative feedback in needs analysis. Whereas some have identified the prevailing written questions-based examination system as an effective method to test the knowledge gathered during the semester, some have come up with opposing feedback. For instance, one suggestion was to make the marking rubrics clearer and more detailed so that the students can get prepared in advance for the examinations with ample understanding of what is expected from them.

The methodological approach employed in this study encompassed both quantitative and qualitative analyses. Quantitative data from online questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics to assess the distribution of students across proficiency levels and preferences for learning styles (Figures 1 and 2). Qualitative data, gathered through open-ended questions in the same questionnaire, underwent thematic analysis to identify recurring themes related to challenges in language learning and preferences for curriculum and assessment methods. This methodological framework aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of students' needs and preferences, contributing to the development of tailored educational strategies.

In summary, the data collected through the needs analysis questionnaire provided several insights into the language learning needs, wants, preferences of teaching styles, goals of the students as well as the deficiencies and expected changes of lesson material, assessment, and evaluation. These findings can serve as a foundation for the significance of needs analysis in the curriculum development in the selected second year English language program at university level.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Dwelling on the findings of the discussed needs analysis carried out taking a sample of 60 second language learners of English at university level, several key recommendations can be made to develop and revise the English language curriculum of the second-year academic program. The focus of the alteration should be on constructive changes to the curriculum, teaching styles and methods, as well as assessment and evaluation strategies to meet the distinct goals and preferences of the students.

Since the majority of students are at a beginner level, with a significant number of students at the intermediate level, it is vital to rethink the course content and alter the teaching strategies which would cater to the needs of different proficiency levels. Differentiated and graded instruction would assist the second language learners at various language proficiency stages.

Since the learners perceive English as a tool to achieve their personal, academic, and professional goals, the curriculum requires integration of language skills which align with the real-world applications and the requirements of the modern occupational world. Thus, these adaptations can pave the way for the students to bridge the gap between their current English language competence and their future academic and professional endeavors.

It should not be disregarded that most students prefer learner-centered teaching methods over teacher-centered conventional methods. Thus, the course should consist of more interactive activities, discussions and games which would make learning an act of enthusiasm. It indirectly enhances the practicality and liveliness of the teaching process as well. The findings of the research also shed light on the difficulties and challenges the students have encountered in four fundamental language skills which are reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Not only those, but also grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation were identified as difficult areas by some learners. The hints of psycholinguistic maladies Xynoglossophobia and Schizoglossia among the key informants manifest the need of psychological support which should be directed towards such students. Thus, ample support should be provided in those given areas and additional and customized lessons should be developed. Extra classes can also be introduced for the students who need further assistance in developing their language skills. Peer-teaching slots and lunchtime talks are some other methods which can be exploited to achieve the same purpose in a more causal manner.

Given the students' criticism on online teaching and learning, the recommendations can be addressed to the higher authorities to improve the technological facilities for the students. Special attention should be paid to ensure whether the students in rural areas have access to these facilities to effectively engage in the online learning activities. This can cater to a smooth transition of online education, with a successful blend of technology and education.

To address the comments on the lesson material, socio-culturally related content to the Sri Lankan students can be introduced to the curriculum. While keeping the advanced content on economics, history, and socio-political factors in the syllabus, introducing topics they prefer such as comics, nature, folk tales, children's stories, and sports can make the curriculum more interesting for the students.

Addressing the students' expectation of individualized teacher feedback, the teachers can be requested to provide personalized feedback on language lessons as much as possible. This procedure can arm the learners with specific insights into their strengths and

areas for improvement, catering to an effective learning experience.

Responding to the students' preferences for novel assessment methods such as interview and presentation-based assessments, a recommendation can be directed to introduce modern assessment methods going beyond traditional testing methods. This change can in turn develop the personality, communication competence and interpersonal and intrapersonal skills of the students to a greater extent.

The feedback on evaluation criteria should also be considered to posit a recommendation for the final examinations. The suggestion of the students to make marking rubrics clearer and more detailed for them to prepare more effectively and face the examination with more confidence cannot be entirely disregarded. Thus, clear, and detailed marking rubrics can be provided to the students, without exceeding the ethics and laws, to enhance transparency and students' understanding of evaluation expectations.

In conclusion, the needs analysis has shed light on several areas requiring revision and improvement in the second- year English language program for the students who follow their degree in Sinhala medium at a state university. With the implementation of the above recommendations, this course can be developed into a more responsive platform which caters to the needs, wants, preferences, and goals of the student, enhancing the smooth and effective exploitation of teaching and learning process.

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