

Assessment Practices in Sinhala Language and Literature Classrooms: Suitability for Developing 21st-Century Skills

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ABSTRACT

Assessment plays a central role in shaping teaching and learning processes, particularly in the context of 21st-century education, which emphasises competencies such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication. Despite these expectations, classroom assessment practices in many education systems remain predominantly examination-oriented. This study examines the alignment between assessment methods used in teaching Sinhala Language and Literature and the development of 21st-century skills within the Sri Lankan school context. A mixed-methods research design with a qualitative emphasis was employed. Data were collected from six government schools representing different school categories (1AB, 1C, and Type-2), involving 12 teachers and 120 Grade 11 students. Data collection methods included questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. The findings indicate that teachers predominantly rely on traditional written assessment methods, which primarily assess knowledge reproduction and written expression, with limited emphasis on higher-order competencies such as collaboration, creativity, and problem-solving. The study also identifies key systemic challenges, including examination pressures, time constraints, and a lack of assessment frameworks, which constrain the implementation of alternative assessment practices. The findings highlight a misalignment between current assessment practices and the goals of 21st-century education. The study contributes to the literature by providing a context-specific analysis of assessment practices within an examination-oriented system and offers implications for improving classroom assessment in language education.

Keywords: Classroom Assessment, 21st-Century Skills, Language Education, Examination-Oriented Systems, Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

Education in the twenty-first century is expected to prepare learners not only with subject knowledge but also with the competencies required to function effectively in a rapidly changing, technology-driven world (OECD, 2019; UNESCO, 2022). Globalization, the expansion of digital technologies, and the transformation of labour markets have increased the importance of skills such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, and problem-solving (Shadiev & Wang, 2022; Panthumas, 2024). These competencies, commonly referred to as 21st-century skills, have become central objectives of contemporary education systems. As a result, teaching, learning, and assessment practices are increasingly expected to support the development of these skills rather than focusing solely on the transmission of factual knowledge.

Within the teaching–learning process, assessment plays a crucial role in determining what students learn and how they learn (Black & Wiliam, 2020). Assessment not only measures students' academic achievement but also shapes classroom practices, influences learning strategies, and guides instructional decision-making. Traditionally, assessment in many school systems has been dominated by written examinations designed primarily to measure students' ability to recall information and reproduce learned knowledge (Almusharraf & Khahro, 2020). While such approaches may provide useful information about students' content knowledge, they are often insufficient for assessing complex competencies associated with 21st-century learning.

Recent educational research highlights the need for more diverse and authentic assessment practices that can capture students' ability to apply knowledge, think critically, communicate ideas effectively, and collaborate with others (Vlachopoulos, 2024; Herlinawati, 2024). Methods such as project-based assessment, portfolios, peer assessment, and performance-based tasks have been widely recommended to better reflect the demands of contemporary education. Despite growing recognition of these approaches in educational policy and research, classroom assessment practices in many contexts continue to rely heavily on traditional written examinations.

In the Sri Lankan school education system, assessment remains strongly influenced by an examination-oriented culture, particularly at the secondary school level (Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka, 2021). As a core subject within the national curriculum, Sinhala Language and Literature plays an important role in developing students' linguistic competence, expressive abilities, and critical understanding of texts and social contexts. The subject offers significant opportunities for students to develop higher-order thinking, creativity, and communication skills. Nevertheless, concerns have been raised that classroom assessment practices may not fully support the development of such competencies, as assessment often focuses primarily on examination performance.

Although a growing body of international literature has examined classroom assessment practices and their relationship to 21st-century skills, most studies have focused primarily on general subject areas or technologically advanced learning environments (Shadiev & Wang, 2022; Zhao et al., 2023). Limited attention has been paid to subject-specific assessment practices within examination-oriented education systems, particularly in developing-country contexts. In Sri Lanka, where the education system is strongly influenced by high-stakes national examinations, classroom assessment practices are often aligned with examination formats, potentially constraining the development of broader competencies.

Furthermore, existing studies tend to document the continued dominance of traditional assessment methods; however, there remains insufficient empirical evidence explaining how these practices operate within specific subject domains such as Sinhala Language and Literature, and how they influence the development of 21st-century skills in real classroom contexts. In addition, there is a lack of integrated analysis linking assessment practices, teacher decision-making, and systemic constraints such as curriculum demands, assessment frameworks, and institutional expectations.

Addressing these gaps is important for developing a more contextually grounded understanding of classroom assessment practices and their implications for contemporary education. Therefore, this study aims to examine the suitability of the assessment methods currently used by teachers in the teaching and learning process of Sinhala Language and Literature for developing 21st-century skills. Specifically, the study seeks to (i) identify commonly used assessment methods, (ii) examine their contribution to the development of 21st-century competencies, and (iii) explore the challenges teachers face in implementing assessment practices aligned with these skills. By focusing on a subject-specific and context-sensitive analysis, this study contributes to ongoing discussions on aligning classroom assessment practices with the demands of twenty-first-century education.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Conceptualising Assessment in 21st-Century Education

Contemporary education systems increasingly emphasise the development of competencies such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication—commonly referred to as 21st-century skills. Within this paradigm, assessment is no longer viewed solely as a mechanism for measuring learning outcomes but as an integral component of the learning process, shaping how students engage with knowledge (OECD, 2019; UNESCO, 2022). Effective assessment practices are expected to capture complex cognitive and social skills, support student-centred learning, and provide meaningful feedback that enhances learning progression.

However, a substantial body of research indicates that classroom assessment practices remain dominated by traditional methods that prioritise knowledge recall and examination performance (Black & Wiliam, 2020; Shadiev & Wang, 2022). This misalignment between the goals of 21st-century education and existing assessment practices has emerged as a critical issue in both developed and developing educational contexts.

2.2 Theoretical Perspectives Informing Assessment Practices

The shift towards competency-based assessment is strongly grounded in constructivist learning theory, which posits that knowledge is actively constructed through learner engagement, interaction, and reflection (Saarsar, 2018). From a constructivist perspective, assessment should extend beyond measuring factual knowledge to evaluating learners' ability to apply knowledge in authentic contexts, engage in problem-solving, and collaborate with others (Golubitchi, 2023; Thomas, 2024). Accordingly, assessment methods such as project-based learning, peer assessment, portfolios, and reflective tasks are considered more appropriate for fostering higher-order skills.

Similarly, the theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983) emphasises the diversity of learners' cognitive abilities and highlights the limitations of standardised, one-dimensional assessment approaches. Traditional written assessments tend to privilege linguistic and logical intelligences while neglecting other forms of intelligence, such as interpersonal, intrapersonal, and creative intelligences (Dagar & Yadav, 2016). This suggests the need for diversified assessment strategies that can capture a broader spectrum of learner abilities. In addition, Shulman's Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) framework underscores the importance of teachers' ability to design and implement pedagogically appropriate, contextually relevant assessment practices (Carmen, 2014). Within this framework, assessment literacy is a critical component, requiring teachers to understand what to assess, how to assess, and how to interpret student performance to inform instruction. A lack of such knowledge may result in the continued reliance on traditional assessment methods, even when alternative approaches are theoretically recognised.

2.3 Global Trends in Classroom Assessment Practices

Empirical studies across diverse educational contexts consistently indicate that traditional assessment methods remain prevalent in classroom practice. Research conducted in Malaysia, Indonesia, and other Asian contexts shows that teachers frequently rely on written examinations, multiple-choice questions, and structured responses because they align with standardised testing systems and are easy to administer (Han & Xu, 2020; Fadilah et al., 2023; Anquoudi et al., 2023).

At the same time, there is increasing recognition of the importance of alternative and authentic assessment approaches. Studies have demonstrated that methods such as portfolio assessment, project-based tasks, and collaborative activities are more effective in fostering higher-order thinking and real-world problem-solving skills (Narayan, 2022; Brown & Sambell, 2019). However, the implementation of such approaches remains inconsistent and often superficial, with many teachers adapting traditional assessment formats rather than fundamentally transforming assessment practices.

Recent research further highlights that even in technology-enhanced learning environments, assessment practices often replicate traditional models rather than leveraging digital tools to assess complex competencies (Khairil & Mokshein, 2024; Long et al., 2024). This suggests that the challenge is not merely technological but also pedagogical and systemic.

2.4 Recent Developments in Assessing 21st-Century Skills (2022–2025)

Recent literature (2022–2025) provides further evidence of the persistent gap between assessment practices and the development of 21st-century competencies. Herlinawati (2024) found that although 21st-century skills are increasingly integrated into curricula, classroom assessment practices often fail to meet expected competency levels, particularly in creativity and collaboration. Similarly, Vlachopoulos (2024), in a systematic review of authentic assessment, concludes that traditional examination-based approaches are insufficient for evaluating complex skills and advocates adopting real-world, performance-based assessment strategies.

Furthermore, studies by White and Taylor (2022) and Lee and Anderson (2024) demonstrate that formative and alternative assessment approaches, such as digital portfolios and peer assessment, can significantly enhance student engagement and provide more meaningful insights into skill development. However, their implementation requires substantial teacher training and institutional support.

Emerging research also highlights the role of technology-enhanced assessment in facilitating the evaluation of 21st-century competencies. Ioannou (2025) argues that interactive and digitally mediated assessment environments can better capture collaborative and creative skills, although challenges related to infrastructure, teacher readiness, and assessment design remain significant. Similarly, Brandt (2025) emphasises the potential of data-driven assessment tools to support competency-based evaluation, while noting the need for clear frameworks and guidelines for effective implementation.

2.5 Challenges in Implementing Contemporary Assessment Practices

Despite the growing recognition of alternative assessment approaches, numerous studies identify persistent challenges that hinder their implementation. One of the most significant barriers is the dominance of examination-oriented education systems, in which student achievement is primarily measured by high-stakes testing (Almusharraf & Khahro, 2020). This often leads teachers to prioritise assessment methods that align with examination formats, limiting opportunities for innovation.

Additional challenges include time constraints, heavy curriculum demands, large class sizes, and limited access to professional development in assessment literacy (Kurnia, 2024; Zhao et al., 2023). Teachers also face difficulties in designing and evaluating assessments that capture complex competencies such as creativity and collaboration, particularly in the absence of clear assessment frameworks (Kain & Koschmieder, 2024).

2.6 Synthesis and Research Gap

Overall, the literature reveals a consistent global pattern in which traditional assessment practices continue to dominate classroom environments despite increasing emphasis on 21st-century competencies. While theoretical frameworks strongly advocate for authentic and competency-based assessment, empirical evidence suggests that their implementation remains limited and context-dependent.

Importantly, most existing studies focus on general educational contexts or technologically advanced environments, with limited attention given to subject-specific assessment practices within examination-oriented systems. Furthermore, there is insufficient integration of perspectives that link classroom practices, teacher knowledge, and systemic constraints.

Therefore, there is a clear need for contextually grounded research that examines how assessment practices operate within specific subject domains and how they influence the development of 21st-century skills. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the suitability of assessment methods used in Sinhala Language and Literature classrooms in Sri Lanka, with particular attention to their alignment with contemporary educational goals.

This study is guided by a conceptual framework that positions classroom assessment practices as a central mechanism influencing the development of 21st-century skills. Assessment practices are shaped by systemic constraints such as examination requirements, curriculum demands, and teacher assessment literacy. These factors mediate the extent to which assessment methods support higher-order competencies, including critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication. The framework assumes that when assessment practices are predominantly examination-oriented, opportunities for developing 21st-century skills are limited, resulting in a misalignment between intended learning outcomes and classroom practices.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design with a qualitative emphasis to examine classroom assessment practices in Sinhala Language and Literature. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data enabled a more comprehensive understanding of assessment practices, their perceived effectiveness, and the challenges teachers face.

The study was conducted in the Uhana Education Division of the Ampara District, Sri Lanka. Six government schools representing key school categories (1AB, 1C, and Type-2) were purposively selected to capture

institutional diversity. The teacher sample comprised 12 Sinhala Language and Literature teachers, and 120 Grade 11 students were selected through simple random sampling.

Data were collected using student questionnaires, semi-structured teacher interviews, and classroom observations. The questionnaire captured patterns of assessment practices and student perceptions, while interviews and observations provided in-depth insights into implementation and contextual constraints.

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages), while qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis. Data triangulation was employed to enhance validity by comparing findings across multiple data sources.

Although the sample size is limited, the study aims to achieve analytical generalisation by providing contextually grounded insights into assessment practices within examination-oriented education systems. In addition, methodological validity was enhanced through triangulation across multiple data sources, ensuring consistency between quantitative and qualitative findings. This approach strengthens the study's trustworthiness by reducing potential bias associated with single-method research.

DATA ANALYSIS

Both quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques were employed in this study. Quantitative data obtained from the questionnaires were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques, including frequencies and percentages, to identify patterns related to teachers' assessment methods and their relationship to the assessment of 21st-century skills. Qualitative data obtained from interviews and classroom observations were analysed using thematic analysis. The qualitative data were first transcribed and carefully reviewed, after which key themes related to assessment practices, the development of 21st-century skills, and the challenges faced by teachers were identified and interpreted.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were carefully considered throughout the research process. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the relevant school authorities. Participation in the study was voluntary, and all participants were informed about the purpose of the research prior to data collection. The confidentiality and anonymity of both teachers and students were maintained, and the collected data were used solely for academic research purposes.

To ensure reliability, the questionnaire items were reviewed for clarity and alignment with the research objectives. The qualitative data analysis followed a systematic coding process, beginning with open coding and then categorising into key themes. To enhance credibility, data triangulation was employed by comparing findings from questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations.

In addition, methodological validity was enhanced through triangulation across multiple data sources, ensuring consistency between quantitative and qualitative findings. This approach strengthens the study's trustworthiness by reducing potential bias associated with single-method research.

RESULTS

The results of the study are presented in accordance with the research objectives to examine the suitability of the assessment methods used by teachers in the teaching and learning process of Sinhala Language and Literature for developing 21st-century skills.

Assessment Methods Currently Used by Teachers

The analysis revealed that teachers use a variety of assessment methods in the teaching and learning process of Sinhala Language and Literature. However, traditional written assessment methods remain the most frequently used forms of evaluation. The most common assessment practices reported by students and observed in classrooms included multiple-choice, short-answer, and long-answer questions; fill-in-the-blank items; letter

writing; and essay writing. Student responses regarding the frequency with which these assessment methods are used in the classroom are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Assessment Methods Commonly Used by Teachers in Sinhala Language and Literature Classrooms

Assessment Method	High Use (%)	Moderate Use (%)	Low Use (%)
Multiple choice questions	–	12.5	87.5
Short answer questions	–	10.0	90.0
Long answer questions	6.7	52.5	40.8
Fill-in-the-blank questions	–	15.0	85.0
Letter writing	10.0	64.1	25.9
Essay writing	9.2	60.8	30.0

Note: Percentages are based on responses obtained from the student sample (n = 120).

As shown in Table 1, written assessment methods such as long-answer questions, essays, and letters are used more frequently than other methods. In contrast, objective-type questions, such as multiple-choice and fill-in-the-blank items, are primarily used to assess factual knowledge and basic comprehension. Classroom observations also confirmed that teachers rely heavily on written assessments due to their compatibility with examination requirements and ease of administration.

Contribution of Current Assessment Methods to the Development of 21st-Century Skills

The study also examined the extent to which teachers' current assessment methods contribute to students' development of 21st-century skills. Student responses indicated that the most commonly used assessment methods primarily evaluate knowledge reproduction and written expression rather than broader competencies such as collaboration, creativity, and problem solving.

Students' perceptions regarding the ability of different assessment methods to evaluate 21st-century skills are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2

Students' Perceptions of the Ability of Assessment Methods to Evaluate 21st-Century Skills

Assessment Method	Critical Thinking	Communication	Creativity	Collaboration
Problem Solving	Low	Low	Low	Very Low
Multiple choice questions	Low	Low	Low	Very Low
Short answer questions	Moderate	High	Moderate	Moderate
Long answer questions	Moderate	High	Moderate	Low
Essay writing	Moderate	Moderate	High	Low
Letter writing	High	Moderate	Low	Low

This comparison indicates a structural misalignment between assessment frequency and competency evaluation. The most frequently used assessment methods are not those that effectively support the development of 21st-century skills. This suggests that assessment practices are driven more by systemic requirements than by pedagogical alignment with learning outcomes.

The findings indicate a clear dominance of traditional written assessment methods, particularly long-answer questions, essays, and structured responses. These methods are closely aligned with examination requirements, which explains their frequent use in classroom contexts.

However, a comparison of Tables 1 and 2 reveals a notable misalignment between frequently used assessment methods and their capacity to evaluate 21st-century competencies. While essay writing and long-answer questions demonstrate moderate potential in assessing critical thinking and communication skills, they remain limited in capturing competencies such as collaboration and creativity.

In contrast, objective-type questions, although commonly used, contribute minimally to higher-order skill development, suggesting that current assessment practices prioritise knowledge reproduction over competency development.

Challenges Faced by Teachers in Implementing Assessment Methods Relevant to the 21st Century

The findings also identified several challenges teachers face when implementing assessment methods that support the development of 21st-century skills. These challenges were identified through teacher interviews and classroom observations.

The main challenges reported by teachers are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3 Challenges Faced by Teachers in Implementing Assessment Practices Relevant to 21st-Century Skills

Identified Challenge	Description
Examination-oriented education system.	Teachers' priorities are written assessments aligned with national examinations.
Time constraints	Limited classroom time restricts the implementation of alternative assessment methods.
Heavy curriculum workload	Teachers focus on completing syllabus content rather than implementing innovative assessment approaches.
Lack of clear assessment frameworks.	Teachers lack clear guidelines for assessing complex competencies such as creativity or collaboration.
Limited professional training.	Few opportunities exist for teachers to receive training on modern assessment methods.
Large class sizes.	Managing alternative assessment practices becomes difficult in overcrowded classrooms.

These findings indicate that although teachers recognise the importance of developing 21st-century skills, structural constraints within the education system limit their ability to implement diverse and innovative assessment practices. As a result, traditional written assessment methods continue to dominate classroom assessment in Sinhala Language and Literature education.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight a significant misalignment between classroom assessment practices and the goals of 21st-century education. The continued dominance of traditional written assessment methods reflects the strong influence of examination-oriented education systems, where assessment practices are primarily shaped by the requirements of high-stakes national examinations.

This suggests that teachers' assessment practices are not solely determined by pedagogical considerations but are significantly mediated by systemic constraints, including curriculum demands, time limitations, and institutional expectations. As a result, assessment practices tend to prioritise knowledge recall and written performance rather than the development of higher-order competencies.

From a constructivist perspective, the limited use of interactive and authentic assessment methods restricts opportunities for active learning, problem-solving, and knowledge application. Similarly, the findings indicate a narrow operationalisation of student ability, which contrasts with the principles of multiple intelligences theory that emphasise diverse learner competencies.

This misalignment can be understood as a consequence of institutional inertia in examination-oriented systems, in which assessment practices remain resistant to pedagogical change despite curriculum reforms. Teachers may recognise the importance of 21st-century skills; however, their assessment decisions are constrained by external accountability mechanisms and performance expectations tied to examination outcomes.

Furthermore, the findings suggest a gap in teachers' assessment-related pedagogical content knowledge, particularly in designing assessment methods that capture complex competencies such as collaboration and creativity. This highlights the importance of strengthening teacher training and professional development in assessment literacy.

These findings are consistent with recent studies (Vlachopoulos, 2024; Ioannou, 2025) that indicate that, despite the increasing emphasis on 21st-century skills, classroom assessment practices remain largely traditional. Overall, the study underscores the need for systemic and pedagogical reforms to align assessment practices with contemporary educational goals.

This study contributes to the existing literature in three key ways. First, it provides a subject-specific analysis of assessment practices within Sinhala Language and Literature, a context that has received limited scholarly attention. Second, it offers an integrated perspective linking assessment practices, teacher decision-making, and systemic constraints. Third, it extends current understanding by demonstrating how examination-oriented systems shape the alignment between assessment and 21st-century competencies.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that classroom assessment practices in Sinhala Language and Literature remain largely traditional and examination-oriented, resulting in limited support for the development of 21st-century competencies. While certain assessment methods provide partial opportunities for evaluating higher-order thinking, the overall assessment framework lacks the diversity required to capture complex skills such as collaboration and creativity.

The study highlights the influence of systemic constraints on teachers' assessment practices and underscores the need for reforms in assessment design, teacher training, and curriculum policy. By providing a context-specific analysis, this study contributes to broader discussions on aligning classroom assessment with the demands of contemporary education

Implications for Educational Practice

The findings of this study have several implications for improving classroom assessment practices in Sinhala Language and Literature education. First, teachers should be encouraged to adopt a wider range of assessment

strategies that allow students to demonstrate higher-order thinking, creativity, and collaboration. Assessment methods such as project-based tasks, presentations, group discussions, and portfolio assessments can provide opportunities for students to apply knowledge in meaningful contexts and develop competencies associated with 21st-century learning.

Second, teacher professional development programs should place greater emphasis on training teachers to design and implement diverse assessment strategies. Providing teachers with practical guidance on assessing complex skills such as critical thinking, creativity, and communication may help them move beyond traditional, examination-oriented assessment practices.

Finally, curriculum developers and educational policymakers should consider integrating clearer guidelines for classroom assessment within the national curriculum. Establishing assessment frameworks that explicitly support the evaluation of 21st-century skills could help teachers align their classroom practices with contemporary educational goals.

Limitations of the Study

Although this study provides valuable insights into classroom assessment practices in Sinhala Language and Literature education, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted within a limited geographical area, focusing only on schools in the Uhana education division of the Ampara district. Therefore, the findings may not fully represent assessment practices across all regions of Sri Lanka.

Second, the sample size of teachers and students was relatively small, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study relied partly on students' perceptions of assessment practices, which may be influenced by individual experiences and interpretations.

Despite these limitations, the study provides important preliminary evidence regarding the current state of classroom assessment practices, and the challenges teachers face in implementing assessment methods aligned with 21st-century learning.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies could expand on the findings of this research in several ways. First, similar studies could be conducted across multiple regions of Sri Lanka to obtain a broader understanding of classroom assessment practices at the national level. Comparative studies across different subjects or educational levels may also provide valuable insights into how assessment practices vary within the education system.

Second, future research could investigate the effectiveness of alternative assessment methods designed to promote 21st-century skills in language education. Experimental or intervention-based studies could explore how approaches such as project-based learning, digital assessment tools, and collaborative learning tasks influence students' skill development.

Finally, further research could examine the perspectives of other stakeholders, including school administrators, curriculum planners, and policymakers, to better understand the systemic factors influencing classroom assessment practices.

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