

The Effect of the Curriculum of the English Access Micro-Scholarship Program on the Improvement of 21st-Century Skills of Its Students in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This paper examines the impact of the English Access Micro-scholarship program curriculum on improving the 21st-century skills of its students in Sri Lanka. The study utilizes a quantitative method for data collection. The sample consists of 92 access students; the data were collected through a structured questionnaire and analyzed with the Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Model (PLS-SEM), supported by SmartPLS. The results show that English knowledge encompassing the four skills targeted through the access micro-scholarship program positively impacts the improvement of 21st-century skills of its students. Communication ability, which is expected to be developed through the access curriculum, has a favorable influence on the enhancement of 21st-century skills of access to students. Additionally, confidence and self-esteem fostered through the access curriculum positively influence the improvement of 21st-century skills of students. Cultural awareness taught through the Access Curriculum also positively impacts this improvement. Finally, English knowledge and time management imparted through the access curriculum significantly enhance the development of 21st-century skills of access students.

Keywords: 21st-Century Skills; Curriculum; English Access Micro-Scholarship Program.

Introduction

In modern society, learning a second or third language has become a common practice, particularly among young learners. Countries invest substantial resources in second-language education, including policies, curriculum development, teacher training, technology integration, and evaluation. Fluency in an international language such as English is crucial, making curriculum design a key factor in the learning process (Burns & Richards, 2018). A well-designed curriculum prepares students for the evolving job market and equips them with 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration (Alismail & McGuire, 2015). Curriculum designers aim to ensure that students acquire knowledge, technological literacy, and practical experience to meet the demands of the contemporary workforce. Despite the growing emphasis on skills-based education, many students in Sri Lanka face challenges to achieve success (Ariyawansa, 2008).

The English Access Micro Scholarship Program (Access) provides economically disadvantaged youth aged 13 to 20 with the opportunity to learn English through intense after-school sessions and other activities specially tailored for community service and leadership development. (Al-Soufi, 2021). The United States Embassy funds the Access program, which is implemented in numerous Asian, South Asian, and African nations. According to the authorities,

the main purpose of this program is to improve computer-related skills and English-language skills. More than 90 nations and almost 200,000 students have taken part in the Access Program since it began in 2004. These students have graduated from the USA (Al-Soufi, 2021).

A significant number of students have completed the course in Sri Lanka as well. This study focuses on the Access students who finished the program in Sri Lanka and examines the impact of the curriculum on achieving the expected 21st-century skills, as well as any differences between the school curriculum and the Access curriculum based on student performance during and after the course. The ACCESS program operates in numerous countries across Asia, South Asia, and Africa. This program's primary goal, according to the authorities, is to enhance English language and computer-related skills. Since its inception in 2004, the Access Program has enrolled nearly 200,000 students across more than 90 countries. They are graduates of the United States. There are few studies conducted about the Access program in other South Asian Countries. (Al-Soufi, 2021).

According to the limited research available, it is clear that the new curriculum designers pay attention to including 21st-century skills in their novel work, recognizing their importance. Through empirical literature, there aren't any theories to discuss the relationship between curriculum and 21st-century skills. Although there is some research conducted in other countries regarding the English Access Micro-Scholarship Program, according to the literature survey of this research, none of the research was found regarding the relationship between the curriculum and 21st-century skills in Sri Lanka. This gap highlights the need for conducting this research. Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to analyze the effect of the curriculum of the English Access Micro-Scholarship Program on the 21st-century skills of its Students in Sri Lanka.

Materials and Methods

The present study examines the effectiveness of the Access curriculum and fostering 21st-century skills, with a focus on prior concepts covered in the literature review. A deductive approach is employed to develop the relationship between independent and dependent variables. Given that, this research applies the existing theories to a practical context. Hence, the philosophy of this research is positivism. Therefore, the adopted methodological approach used in this research is the quantitative method, which involves collecting data using a structured questionnaire and a survey.

Sample: In this research, the unit of analysis consists of Access students. These students are participants in the English Access Micro-Scholarship Program. There are four centers in operation in Ampara, Puttalam, Kaluthara, and Aluthgama. The approximate number of access students in a center is 30, and therefore, the population size is 120. According to the sample size calculator (calculater.net), the required sample size was identified as 92 to maintain a 95% confidence level in the research. The first 92 responses received were used as data for analysis using the random sampling method.

Data collection: Access curriculum was assessed using its Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs); English Knowledge and four language skills, Communication ability in different contexts, cultural awareness, confidence and self-esteem, and time management. 21st Century skills were measured using 37 items (See Table 1) developed by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2019, representing all the aspects adopted. Self-report structural questionnaire items are used to collect data using a seven-point Likert scale. Responses ranged from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. Data was gathered for the questionnaire through face-to-face interviews with respondents.

Data analysis: A PLS-SEM is used as the main analysis technique to test hypothetical relationships. The analysis was conducted in two steps: first measurement of variables, and second, evaluating the structural model. The study first assessed the reliability and validity of the variables. Each of the outer loadings was used to calculate the indicator reliability value, which should be 0.7 or higher. For each indicator, the t-statistic should be more than 1.96, and the path coefficient should be significant. For a construct's internal consistency reliability, Cronbach's (CA) alpha and composite reliability (CR) should be 0.7 or higher. The convergent validity was tested using the average

variance extracted (AVE), and each latent variable should have an AVE value greater than 0.5 (Hair et al., 2014). The structural model evaluated the multicollinearity, significance of path coefficients, coefficients of determination (R^2), and effect size.

Results

First, the study calculated measurements of variables to ensure their reliability and validity. Indicator reliability was identified using factor loadings of items and their t-statistics. The factor loading for all items related to variables lies above the threshold value of 0.7. This indicates a high degree of indicator reliability. A strong connection with their respective items was suggested by the t-statistics, which also showed that all factor loadings were statistically significant at a 95% confidence level. Internal consistency reliability was satisfactory with CA values ranging from 0.928 to 0.972, well above the recommended threshold of 0.7. To further support the accuracy of the evaluations, the CR scores for all 21st talents ranged from 0.933 to 0.975. All variables had AVE values between 0.659 and 0.771, indicating that each construction accounted for a significant portion of the variance in each skill. A requirement for the discriminant validity of first-order constructions was met when there were no inter-construct correlation values over the square root of the AVE. The next step of the study tested hypotheses. Based on the PLS-SEM results as indicated in Table 1, each path coefficient is statistically significant. The essential t-value was established to be 1.96 at a significance level of 0.05 (Hair et al., 2014). Therefore, all hypotheses except one are accepted. To assess the association between the two variables, R^2 has been used in the study. Accordingly, R^2 was 0.865. The model demonstrates the significant impact of the predictive variables.

Table 1

Path Coefficients and Significance of Hypotheses

Hypotheses	Path coefficient	T statistics	P values	Decision
H:1 Communicate ability -> 21st-century skills	0.077	1.305	0.194	Not accepted
H2: Confidence and self-esteem -> 21st-century skills	0.291	4.133	0.000	Accepted
H3: Cultural awareness -> 21st-century skills	0.271	3.783	0.000	Accepted
H4: English Knowledge and four skills -> 21st-century skills	0.166	2.534	0.012	Accepted
H5: Time management -> 21st-century skills	0.216	3.414	0.001	Accepted

Discussion

H1 suggests that the communication ability improved through the Access curriculum, positively impacting the upgrading of 21st-century skills among Access students. The path coefficient of 0.077 indicates a positive relationship between communication ability and 21st-century skills among Access students. However, results suggest that communication ability, an intended learning outcome of the Access curriculum, has a positive impact on the improvement of 21st-century skills of Access students. Through their ability to solve problems and master the material, students who were exposed to these 4Cs have demonstrated their effectiveness (Chiruguru, 2020).

H2 suggests that Confidence and self-esteem, focused through the Access curriculum, positively impact the improvement of 21st-century skills in Access students. The path coefficient of 0.291 indicates a positive relationship between confidence and self-esteem to improve 21st-century skills among Access students. The T statistics of 3.783 suggest that the positive responses to this relationship are higher than the negative ones. This data provides strong evidence to accept hypothesis 2. Self-esteem is a crucial component of an individual's presence in the classroom. Schools can play an important part in fostering self-esteem among students (Nuryana, Xu & Lu, 2023). The creation

of a curriculum that helps to improve the students' self-esteem is an initiative that can be undertaken. A curriculum is a set of segments created for students to follow instructions from educational institutions. The content of the curriculum can be either static or dynamic and includes the necessary competencies. (Nuryana, Xu & Lu, 2023).

H3 suggests that cultural awareness taught through the Access curriculum positively contributes to the development of 21st-century skills of Access students. The path coefficient of 0.271 indicates a positive relationship between cultural awareness and 21st-century skills among Access students. The t-statistic 3.783 indicates that the number of positive responses to accept this relationship is higher than the negative responses. This evidence provides strong evidence to accept hypothesis 3. Thus, it can be determined that cultural awareness, which is targeted through the Access program, impacts the improvement of 21st-century skills among Access students. In today's globalized world, intercultural communication competence (ICC) is essential for human survival, particularly in contemporary education and worldwide business (Sarwari et al., 2024).

H4 suggests that English knowledge and the four skills influence the improvement of 21st-century skills of Access students. The path coefficient of 0.166 indicates a positive relationship between English knowledge and the four skills and 21st-century skills. The t-statistics of 2.534 suggests that the responses on this relationship are statistically significant, and it provides highly significant evidence to accept hypothesis 4. The 21st-century language classroom encompasses more than just teaching and studying language skills and vocabulary. In addition to mastering language, one must also acquire other talents that are thought to be essential in 21st-century skills, to meet the demands and overcome the obstacles of the modern world (Idrizi, 2023).

H5 suggests that time management, emphasized in the Access curriculum, positively influences improvement of 21st-century skills of Access students. The path coefficient of 0.216 indicates a positive relationship between time management and 21st-century skills among Access students. The t-statistic of 3.414 indicates that the positive responses on this relationship are greater than the negative responses. This data provides strong evidence to accept hypothesis 5. Effective time management significantly influences overall performance and accomplishments. For students to succeed, effective time management is essential. Nevertheless, some students struggle with time management, which has a detrimental impact on both their academic performance and their personal well-being (Nasrullah & Khan, 2015).

Conclusion

Research findings indicate that the Access program effectively enhances students' 21st-century skills through its curriculum. The results show that English language knowledge with the four skills targeted through the access micro-scholarship program, positively impacts the improvement of 21st-century skills of its students. Communication ability, which is expected to be developed through the access curriculum, has a favorable influence on the enhancement of 21st-century skills of Access students. Additionally, confidence and self-esteem fostered through the access curriculum positively influence the improvement of 21st-century skills. Cultural awareness taught through the access curriculum also positively impacts this improvement. Finally, English knowledge and time management imparted through the access curriculum significantly enhance the development of 21st-century skills among students.

This study highlights the impact of the English Access Micro-Scholarship Program on Sri Lankan students, addressing a research gap in this context. The researcher identified Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) from the Access Curriculum, adding new knowledge since the program lacked predefined outcomes. The findings show that small class sizes, well-trained teachers, and interactive activities enhance students' English proficiency. The curriculum fosters confidence, creativity, IT literacy, leadership, and 21st-century skills. Access students develop digital literacy, cross-cultural communication, and self-direction. Ultimately, this research confirms that the Access curriculum effectively enhances students' 21st-century skills in Sri Lanka, providing a basis for future studies.

This research study highlights key policy recommendations to enhance English language curriculum development, aiming to improve education quality and prepare students for global success. The curriculum should focus on all

four language skills, with particular emphasis on speaking, as it is essential for communication. Students should be exposed to diverse accents and cultural interactions beyond their immediate communities to enhance linguistic competence and cultural awareness. Collaboration with different groups fosters understanding, peaceful coexistence, and expanded job opportunities. Additionally, the curriculum should incorporate leadership training, personality development, and teamwork through well-designed activities. In a developing country like Sri Lanka, early emphasis on time management is crucial for individual and societal progress. Furthermore, integrating 21st-century skills into English education will ensure that students are equipped for the evolving job market. Overall, a modernized curriculum will produce globally competent individuals capable of achieving personal and professional success.

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