



UNLOCKING THE ASSESSMENT PUZZLE: AN INVESTIGATION INTO UNDERGRADUATES' PREFERENCES FOR FORMATIVE AND SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENTS

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Assessment plays a crucial role in the teaching and learning process, providing valuable feedback to students and evaluating their learning outcomes. This research focuses on exploring undergraduates' preferences for formative and summative assessments in the context of a government university in Sri Lanka. By conducting a qualitative analysis of data gathered from 43 participants of a purposive sampling, this study aims to contribute to the existing literature on assessment preferences of the undergraduates who learn English as a second language. An open-ended questionnaire has been utilized as the data collection tool and 43 voluntary participants have provided responses out of 70 of an entire sample. The gathered data has been analysed thematically. The study reveals several key findings regarding the participants' perceptions on formative assessments. Participants consistently recognized the importance of formative assessments and their positive impact on learning. The qualitative data emphasized the instrumental role of formative assessments in improving various English language skills. Participants emphasized the role of summative assessments as an overall measurement of language proficiency. They viewed summative assessments as an opportunity to demonstrate their achievement and provide a clear goal to strive for. Moreover, the participants stated that more effort should be devoted to summative assessments compared to formative assessments. The findings suggest the importance of incorporating a balanced approach to assessment, utilizing both formative and summative assessments in a complementary manner. To further enrich the field of assessment research, future studies could explore the influence of cultural backgrounds, teaching methods, and personal learning styles on students' assessment preferences.

Keywords: English as a Second Language, Formative Assessments, Higher Education, Preferences, Summative Assessments, Undergraduates

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INTRODUCTION

Assessment is an integral part of the teaching and learning process. It plays a significant role in evaluating the effectiveness of the teaching process, enhancing the quality of learning, and providing feedback to the learners. Assessment can take different forms, including formative and summative assessments. While formative assessments provide ongoing feedback and support to learners during the learning process, summative assessments evaluate learning outcomes at the end of a learning period. Both forms of assessment are essential in measuring learning outcomes, but there is an ongoing debate on which form of assessment is preferred by the undergraduates.

Several studies have been conducted on the topic of the roles of formative and summative assessments in language education. However, there is a gap in the literature regarding the students' preferences regarding this. Additionally, most of the studies have been conducted in the context of Western education systems, and there is a need for more research on this topic in non-Western contexts. Therefore, this study aims to fill the gap in the literature by exploring the undergraduate students' preferences for formative and summative assessments in the context of a non-Western education system. Previous studies have explored the advantages and disadvantages of formative and summative assessments. Black and William (1998) for example, argue that formative assessment can enhance learning by providing regular feedback to students, identifying areas of weakness, and promoting a culture of self-regulation. In contrast, summative assessments focus on evaluating learning outcomes, providing a snapshot of students' achievement at the end of a learning period. Black and William (1998) argue that summative assessments can motivate students to learn by providing a clear goal to achieve and promoting a sense of achievement.

However, studies have also highlighted the drawbacks of both forms of assessment. Formative assessments can be time-consuming for teachers and may not be effectively used to enhance learning outcomes (Hounsell, 2008). On the other hand, summative assessments can promote a narrow focus on content knowledge and may not effectively measure higher-order thinking skills (Biggs, 1999). Despite the potential benefits of formative assessments, summative assessments continue to be the predominant mode of assessment in many educational settings (Birenbaum & Dochy, 2010). Specially in the Sri Lankan Second language learning context both in the secondary and tertiary education systems priority has been given to summative assessments. This raises the question of whether students prefer formative or summative assessments and the factors that influence their preferences. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate undergraduates' preferences for formative and summative assessments to inform the development of assessment practices that promote learning outcomes effectively. This study aims to contribute to the existing literature on assessment preferences of the undergraduates and to provide insights.

METHODOLOGY

This study has been conducted with the voluntary participation of 43 undergraduates out of 70 of an entire sample. The participants are currently in their 2nd year, and they are following the



Bachelor of Information and Communication Technology degree program in a government university of Sri Lanka. With reference to previous evaluations, it has been measured that the participants belong to the Pre-intermediate(A2) level of English Language proficiency as per the CEFR levels (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). An opinion questionnaire that contains open ended questions has been used as the data collection instrument of this research. Herein, a qualitative approach has been practiced and the gathered qualitative data has been transcribed and thematically analyzed. The findings have been integrated to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' preferences. Before conducting the study, ethical consent has been taken from both the institution and the participants. Since it is not expected to generalize the findings via this study, purposive sampling has been utilized with the participation of a selected group of undergraduates. The focus of the study was on the preferences of undergraduates for formative and summative assessments. Other factors that could influence assessment preferences, such as cultural background, teaching methods, or personal learning styles, were not extensively explored. Therefore, future research work can be conducted based on these areas.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the gathered qualitative data of the study, the following results have been generated. The qualitative data provided by the 43 participants regarding their experience with formative assessments has been thematically analyzed as follows to identify the recurring themes and patterns.

Table 1: Participants' perceptions on formative assessments

Theme	Description
Importance and Impact	Participants recognized the importance of formative assessments and believed they positively impact learning.
Difficulty and Challenges	Some participants mentioned the difficulty of formative assessments and acknowledged the challenges they face.
Speaking, Presentations and projects	Participants found continuous speaking assessments, projects, and presentations enjoyable and beneficial for their learning.
Skill Development	Formative assessments were seen as instrumental in developing various English language skills more than summative assessments.
Personal Growth and Future Benefits	Participants recognized the personal growth and future benefits associated with continuous assessments.

The qualitative data that have been gathered based on the perceptions of the participants regarding the summative assessments have been thematically analyzed as follows.



Table 2: Participants' perceptions on summative assessments

Theme	Description
Summative assessments as an overall measurement of language proficiency	Participants recognized that summative assessments could give an overall understanding about the language proficiency of individuals
Effort and Preparation	Participants acknowledged that more effort should be given to summative assessments than to formative assessments
Fairness and equity	Participants claimed that summative assessments evaluate them more fairly than formative assessments.
Importance and Impact	Although summative assessments created more pressure on language learning, the participants state that summative assessments make them motivated to study a lot.
Skill Development	The participants have specifically mentioned that summative assessments have helped them to improve their writing skills and grammar.

The first major theme identified in the data analysis is the importance and impact of formative assessments. Participants recognized the significance of these assessments and believed that they positively impact learning. Similarly, participants acknowledged the role of continuous speaking assessments, projects, and presentations in developing their language skills. These findings are in line with the literature on formative assessments, which suggest that they can have a positive impact on student learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

On the other hand, some participants expressed the difficulty of formative assessments and acknowledged the challenges they face. However, the benefits of such assessments were seen to outweigh the difficulties. Furthermore, participants recognized the personal growth and future benefits associated with formative assessments. This indicates that the use of formative assessments can promote a growth mindset among students, which is essential for lifelong learning.

Regarding the summative assessments, participants believed that they provide an overall understanding of language proficiency. However, they also acknowledged that more effort should be given to summative assessments than formative assessments. These findings are consistent with previous research that has suggested that summative assessments are essential for evaluating student achievement and making decisions about further education and employment (Shepard, 2000).



The present study has several implications for English language teaching. Overall, the findings suggest that both types of assessments have a significant impact on language learning. The study has important implications for English language teaching practices and highlights the need for a balance between formative and summative assessments to promote student learning and achievement.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study provides valuable insights on undergraduates' preferences for formative and summative assessments in a non-Western education system. The findings highlight the importance and positive impact of formative assessments on learning, particularly in terms of skill development and personal growth. Additionally, the study underscores the role of summative assessments as a means of measuring overall language proficiency and motivating students to study. These findings emphasize the need for a balanced approach to assessment in English language teaching, integrating both formative and summative assessments to optimize student learning outcomes.

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made for English language teaching practices. Firstly, it is recommended that educators should incorporate formative assessments into their teaching methodologies to provide students with regular feedback and support their language development. Secondly, the study suggests that summative assessments should be given due importance, as they serve as a measure of overall language proficiency and can motivate students to study. However, it is essential to strike a balance between formative and summative assessments to ensure a comprehensive evaluation of students' language abilities. Additionally, teacher training programs should emphasize the effective design and implementation of both types of assessments, considering the challenges and difficulties highlighted by the participants of the present study.

Abbreviations

CEFR- Common European Framework Reference for languages

ESL – English as a Second Language

ELT- English Language Teaching

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