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FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL: TRADITIONAL VS. ALTERNATIVE PRACTICES

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Abstract
This study examines how traditional and alternative assessment methods operate at the university level. It focuses on how these styles affect skill development and learning. Traditional styles include quizzes and short tests. These kinds of tests are quick and easy to use in large classes and give results in less time. This research combines quantitative data on students' learning outcomes and surveys, while qualitative data were collected through interviews and discussions with higher-education-level students. The main purpose of this research is to compare traditional and alternative methods and examine how they work at the university level. How quizzes, presentations, peer group observations and tests help to develop critical thinking at the university level. This research draws a pragmatic worldview and studies 50 undergraduate students at the university. This study presents alternative practices that enhance student motivation, learning skills, and critical thinking. Research methodology highlights the challenges which are barriers to alternative methods, such as limited resources or poor time management. Discussion concludes with the idea that formative assessment helps develop students' critical thinking and promotes creativity. In Pakistani universities, where large classes, language barriers, and limited resources are common, the results show that irrationalism styles increase students' interest and help them improve their weaknesses. Overall, the findings suggest a balanced approach. Combining the challenges of traditional tools with the engagement of crucial styles can produce better results.
Keywords*: Formative assessment; Alternative assessment; Traditional assessment; Skill development; language barriers; student performance*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Formative assessment began in the 1960s, when Michael Scriven introduced the term to describe evaluation focused on improving learning and student assessment. After Scriven, other researchers explained that it differs from summative assessment, which is used in schools, in that it focuses on providing helpful feedback during lectures rather than only observing final results. At present, these methods include quizzes, presentations, peer group observations, and project-based assessments.

Assessment is a systematic process of gathering information and analyzing data regarding students' understanding of a course or topic. It is all about what students know, what they understand, and what they can do. It is a process that measures students' learning, skills, and academic performance. Formative assessment is a process which teachers use to check how

well students learn during lessons. In this process, a teacher collects data through tests, assignments, projects, presentations and quizzes. There are two main types of assessment used widely in universities: formative assessment and alternative assessment. Formative assessment is a type of assessment in which teachers check students' learning during lectures or courses, provide feedback, and help them improve their learning. This method helps teachers to understand what students get and learning during the lecture. What they grasp and how they understand. These methods also help teachers improve their teaching and better support students. At the university level, formative assessment plays an important role because students expect to develop their critical thinking and gain more knowledge from teachers. Students want to improve their problem-solving skills and be able to face real-life problems. To fulfil students' goals, teachers need to carefully adopt formative assessment, not only during test sessions but also by providing sincere feedback, thereby improving students' learning during lectures.

Traditional methods include quizzes, short tests, MCQ-type questions, and teacher feedback. This method is considered easy because it is easy to check and takes less time. Traditional methods are very popular because these test sessions are easy to conduct and evaluate, and they work better in large classes. This method also helps give quick feedback to students on their basic knowledge of the topic. However, this method did not improve students' advanced skills, such as creativity, analysis, or teamwork. This is why most universities use traditional methods alongside creative activities such as group discussions, presentations, and peer-group projects. However, traditional methods are often criticized because most students focus on cramming and memorizing rather than on understanding the topic. This kind of method checks student performance at a surface level, not in depth, and their critical thinking. On the other hand, alternative assessment methods include portfolios, peer group observations, project-based tasks, presentations, and group discussions. These methods improve students' learning skills and engaging options. This method is based on creative learning and active participation of students. For example, presentations develop students' communication skills and help them address the audience.

1.2 Scope and Significance of the Study

This research explores how formative and alternative methods are used at Pakistani public universities, especially at the undergraduate level. It focuses on both traditional approaches, such as quizzes and written tests, and alternative approaches, including portfolios, peer assessment, and project-based tasks. These methods are studied in general courses such as English, social studies, Islamic studies, and Pakistan studies.

The importance of this study lies in its ability to provide practical guidance for improving the quality of university education. Effective formative assessment can increase student engagement during lectures and reduce cramming and memorizing at higher levels. Higher education plays an important role in a country's national development. Higher education improves a person's skill development. According to both local and international studies, a practical strategy that improves academic performance through deep understanding is highlighted. It also improves teaching methodologies and teacher training, and enhances higher-level curriculum development.

1.3 Statement of Problem

In Pakistani universities, a very common problem is that formative assessment depends on traditional methods. These methods priorities quick results over students' deep understanding of the topic and practical skills. Teachers considered that the quiz-and-test method is easy to

evaluate and manage in large classes, but it offers fewer benefits than alternative methods. These methods discourage students and increase their stress. Another drawback of this method is that students' weaknesses persist without improvement, and they are not able to face real-life challenges and problems. Teachers are also relying on these methods because of poor time management and grading requirements. On the other hand, the alternative method can enhance students' learning skills and address their weaknesses over time. Some teachers did not adopt alternative methods sometimes due to workload, grading subjectivity, lack of institutional support, or limited resources. This can lead to poor learning outcomes and failure to achieve modern goals.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

- The study also examines which assessment method is most suitable at the university level.
- Examining research that also focuses on formative assessment increases students' interest in the study.
- The main aim of this research is to compare and contrast traditional and alternative formative assessment methods at the higher level.
- It also explores the main focus: evaluating how these methods influence students' motivation, participation, and academic performance.

1.5 Research Questions

This study raises several key questions, such as:

- Which is the most suitable type of assessment at the university level?
- Does formative assessment increase the interest of students in study?
- How both methods affect student motivation and help develop learning skills. How are both methods different from others?

1.6 Limitations and Delimitation of the Study

This study has several limitations and delimitations. This study is limited by time constraints, which restricted the time available for data collection and analysis. The study was confined to university-level students from the English department. The study was limited to online resources and digital learning materials used by students, and data were collected via a Google Form distributed to university groups.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Formative assessment plays an important role in assessing university students in higher education. Formative assessment is a process that helps check students' performance during lectures and supports their improvement. Here, the literature review compares traditional and alternative practices at the university level. Firstly, the review highlights the key concepts of each practice, then compares the two. Lastly, it highlights evidence from previous studies and different articles. The literature review section consists of the sections which are given below:

2.1 Recent Studies

Recent studies on formative assessment at the university level show that this method offers many benefits but also presents some challenges. Recent studies emphasize that when students have a lot of quizzes, their minds divert and they do not focus on the topic, and they do not participate well in class. At the university level, alternative methods help to improve students' learning skills and thinking processes. However, in Pakistani universities, traditional methods are mostly used because they are easy to manage and yield results more quickly for a large number of classes. It is widely recognized that educators and scholars have

consistently employed various methods and strategies to teach students effectively throughout history. Instructors have implemented these practices to assess whether students have comprehensively grasped the material presented. Formative assessment (FA) is regarded as offering significant educational advantages for enhancing students' learning (*Black & William, 1998, 2018*).In fact, the formative process clarifies that "a program is still malleable while it is in the planning and developmental stages, and the information gathered from evaluation can therefore contribute to change in the program" (*Greenstein, 2010*). In their book, *Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey (2014)* examined several popular formative assessment strategies and how to use them in the classroom. They emphasized how crucial these methods are to improving student learning. They contended that most classroom professors use queries like "Did you all get that?" or "Does that make sense?" to gauge their pupils' comprehension of the material. *According to Fisher and Frey (2014),* these approaches are insufficient for assessing students' actual level of learning. This book's content is categorized as "oral language, questioning, writing, projects and performances, tests, and school-wide approaches" (Fisher & Frey, 2014). In their article on the value of feedback, John Hattie and Helen *Timperley (2007)* stated that it is a crucial component of the formative assessment process that affects students' learning in responding to these three crucial questions: "Where am I going? (What are the objectives?), How am I doing? (How far along is the goal?), and what comes next? (What actions must be taken in order to improve progress?) (*Timperley & Hattie, 2007*).In his article about the value of feedback, *Timperley (2007*) stated that it is a crucial component of the formative assessment process that affects students' learning in responding to these three crucial questions: "Where am I going? (What are the objectives?), How am I doing? (How far along is the goal?), and what comes next? (What actions must be taken in order to improve progress?) (*Page 86 of Hattie & Timperley, 2007*). According to Hattie and Timperley (2007), the best learning environment is created when a teacher interacts with students during class and responds to their questions. *Paul Back and Dylan Williams (1998)* published a paper on a meta-analysis. An article about a meta-analysis of formative assessment and its effect on students' academic performance was published by *Dylan Williams in 1998*. In order to determine the answers to these three crucial issues, the study conducted a detailed evaluation of the question: "Is there proof that raising standards through improved formative assessment?" 2) "Is there proof that there is space for improvement?"3) "Is there proof that formative assessment can be improved?" *Black and Williams (1998*) concluded that all three questions had affirmative answers. "There is a body of firm evidence that formative assessment is an essential component of classroom work and that its development can raise standards of achievement," the authors said. To determine the impact of formative assessment on student learning, the Regional Educational Laboratory (2017) conducted a systematic review of 23 studies. According to Klute, Apthorp, Harlacher, and Reale (2017), 19 studies were considered to provide sufficient information to measure 30 distinct effect sizes. Students who helped with the dynamic use of formative assessment were found to score higher on "measures of academic achievement" than students who were never given the chance to use formative assessment. It is clear from this systematic analysis that "formative assessment had a positive effect on student academic achievement on average across all the studies" (Klute et al, 2017). This evaluation is useful in educating educators and educational institutions on how to use formative assessment accurately and effectively to raise the target level of academic achievement. According to research, students' English proficiency level significantly affects their comprehension of course material (Abedi, 2007).

Lack of English proficiency may be one of the main barriers to ELL students' access to content information, according to research on learning opportunities (*Abedi & Herman, in press; Herman & Abedi, 2004)*. Writing abilities are "one of the most important skills that young people can acquire and develop throughout their lives," according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) framework (*National Centre for Education Statistics, 2002*).Students who lack the necessary level of English proficiency to comprehend academic English instruction may become frustrated, lose interest, and find it difficult to stay focused. Additionally, they may be mistakenly classified as students with learning difficulties. (*Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005; Abedi, 2006).*Formative assessment is an essential component of improving students' performance, as it involves both teachers and students in active roles. In keeping with its goal, this kind of evaluation concentrates on gauging students' development. Hamedi et al. (2022) examined the effects of formative assessment on the vocabulary knowledge of Iranian EFL students (*McCallum & Milner, 2021)*. 60 participants were split into experimental and control groups for this study. The results showed that formative assessment significantly increased Iranian EFL students' vocabulary knowledge. The study examined the benefits of formative assessment for the language acquisition of Iranian EFL learners (Ismail et al., 2022). Annals of Human and Social Sciences (AHSS) Vol. *According to Dylan William's (2017)* research, classroom discussions, learning tasks, and effective feedback that motivates learning are important formative assessment strategies that teachers must use to enhance and support students' learning journeys. This will encourage students to evaluate their own learning outcomes positively. *According to Sing (2019*), "teachers need to note that there is generally consensus on the importance of feedback provided in order to move learning forward or to close learning gaps" (Kaur, 2023).*According to Black and William (1998),* effective formative assessment occurs when teachers actively participate and consistently modify their teaching and learning strategies in response to assessment results. According to Heritage (2010), formative assessment is a process in which both students and teachers actively participate. As a result, teachers must give students ongoing feedback on their learning and offer helpful suggestions to support their progress during peer and self-assessment processes in order to achieve the intended learning objectives. In addition to impacting their English language proficiency, the regular monitoring of ongoing assessment practices such as oral question-answer sessions, presentations, quizzes, tests, written assignments, and projects also genuinely contributes to their academic output in the evaluation criteria for mid, sessional, and final marks.

Overall, recent studies (2003-2025) show a shift from traditional summative to formative assessment at universities. A key trend is that feedback, peer involvement, and AI learning improve students' thinking skills. This method consistently improves students' learning and performance and helps to engage students during lectures.

2.2 Research Gaps

These studies provide some research gaps in traditional and alternative practices at the university level. Existing research indicates that most studies discuss formative, traditional, and alternative assessment separately or in a theoretical manner. However, a comparative analysis of all three assessment methods within a single study is rarely found. Furthermore, many studies have focused on either teachers' or students' perspectives, while limited research has integrated both viewpoints for a more comprehensive analysis. In addition, most research has been conducted in developed countries, which limits understanding of the

effectiveness and acceptance of these assessment methods in local contexts, particularly within Pakistan's education system. Therefore, the present study aims to address these gaps by providing a comparative analysis of formative, traditional, and alternative assessment methods, incorporating both teachers' and students' perspectives and examining the effectiveness of these methods within the local educational context. A previous study shows that formative assessment improves students' motivation and helps them grow and stay engaged during lectures. Formative assessment helps to develop self-regulated learning at the university level. In Pakistan, research is very limited; few studies address local challenges such as class size, language barriers, and teaching methodologies. There are still some gaps remaining.

2.2.1 Methodological Gaps

Recent studies have found that most used different methods but were unable to explain the gist of the study. This research is helpful in that way.

2.2.2 Conceptual Gaps

Recent studies show that, conceptually, their concepts were unclear about how to distinguish among formative, traditional, and alternative assessments. In this study, the alignment of objectives and research questions with the study has been discussed thoroughly.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

William and Thompson's (2007) framework, which outlines key aspects of formative assessment, served as the theoretical underpinning of this study. Rather than assigning the teacher sole responsibility, the framework accounts for the integral roles of students, their peers, and teachers in forming a learning community that shares responsibility for student learning. This framework captures the interactive nature of formative assessment and five key strategies associated with enacting it: Clarifying and sharing learning intentions and criteria for success, Engineering effective classroom discussions and other learning tasks that elicit evidence of student understanding. Providing feedback that moves learners forward. Activating students as instructional resources for one another. Activating students as the owners of their own learning (Black & William, 2008, 2009). Sharing learning intentions and criteria for success is a broad strategy by which teachers explain the goals for learning and criteria for success in student-friendly language. This research is based on a combined theoretical framework that depicts Black and William's (2009) theory of formative assessment as the regulation of learning with sociocultural constructivist perspectives (Piaget, 1974; Vygotsky via Lave, 1988; Heritage, 2010). These theoretical frameworks explain how formative practices influence student learning at the university level and justify the comparison between traditional and alternative practices. Both researchers highlight the importance of providing feedback and improving students' learning and assessment outcomes. This research is also based on *Biggs'* idea of *constructive alignment*, which emphasizes that achieving learning goals, improving teaching methods, and assessments all work together. Formative assessment helps achieve this by providing feedback that enables teachers to improve their teaching practices. Similarly, Black and William's model highlights the importance of providing timely feedback so students can regulate their learning and improve.

2.4 Conceptual Framework

Formative assessment is an aligned process that sets learning goals, then teachers conduct activities to achieve these goals and provide feedback to improve students' performance. A traditional method follows a straight path and primarily focuses on grades, whereas

alternative practices repeat steps and emphasize student learning. Class size, teaching methods, and available resources can tell us how these methods work together.

2.5 Analytical Framework

To compare traditional and alternative practices at the university level, the literature was synthesized, and primary survey data were collected from university students. This framework depicts established dimensions from formative assessment research (Black & William, 1998, 2009; Dikli, 2003; Vlachopoulos, 2004) and draws on practical applications in Pakistani universities. By combining qualitative and quantitative data, we gather information from surveys, tests, and interviews.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The following exploration methodology is generally used: a mixed-methods approach. This is most suitable because qualitative data provides an in-depth study, while quantitative data provides breadth (how many, how much). Together, they create a fuller, more holistic understanding that neither method can achieve alone. Qualitative research focuses on understanding experiences, perceptions, behaviours, and meanings. In formative assessment, a mixed-methods approach helps evaluate how students learn, think, and develop skills.

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods research design with comparative, exploratory, and descriptive orientations. A mixed-methods design is suitable for the present study because it provides a more comprehensive understanding of formative assessment practices at the university level. Specifically, it combines quantitative elements (such as a questionnaire for collecting statistical data on students' outcomes) with qualitative elements (such as interviews and focus group discussions) to better understand research problems.

3.2 Research Instruments (Tools and Items)

A 20-point self-administered online Google Form questionnaire was designed to gather quantitative data from students in the English departments of 2 universities. The questionnaire was adapted from validated scales in the literature on formative assessment. A semi-structured interview protocol was developed to collect in-depth qualitative data exploring students' experiences, rational ideas, and the challenges they face during formative assessment. Interviews with each student lasted 10-15 minutes and were conducted in person with consent. The questionnaire provided measurable comparisons and statistical data, while interviews captured students' different thoughts and experiences.

3.3 Population and Sampling

The participants in this study are undergraduate scholars from two public universities in Pakistan. An arbitrary sample of 100 scholars (divided into traditional and indispensable assessment groups) and a purposive selection of 10 educated preceptors were chosen to ensure diversity in the study environment.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

The data collection for the mixed-methods study followed a convergent parallel design, in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected sequentially. This data collection enables direct comparison and integration during analysis. This procedure provided efficiency and enabled triangulation of findings from both strands. Those studies also provide a fuller and broader picture of traditional versus alternative practices at the university level. In this process, participants received a Google Form questionnaire shared through official university WhatsApp groups, which included some MCQ-type questions that emphasized this

study, its nature, and risks. Consent forms were obtained by digital recording. The data collection period is approximately one week to maximize response rate, and responses are automatically recorded in Google Forms. Interviews were conducted with the distribution of the questionnaire to align with the convergent design. Interested participants were contacted to arrange a 10-15-minute interview via Zoom or a face-to-face discussion. Each interview starts with report building, reconfirming their ideas, and, with their permission, recording the interview. The semi-structured interviews adhered to flexibility and informed consent.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

The responses to the online survey questionnaire shared for this study are recorded below:-

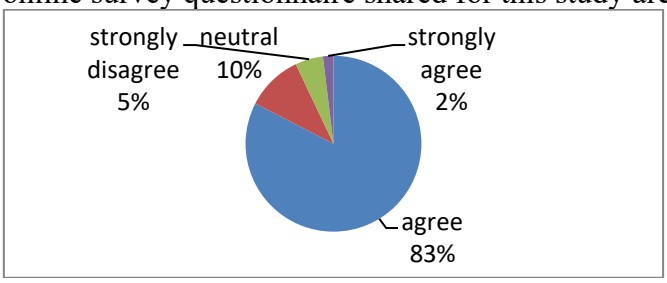

Figure 1 Short quizzes in class help me understand the lesson quickly.

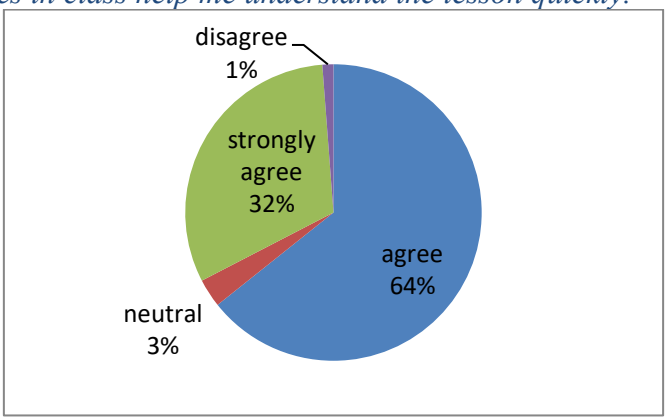

Figure 2 When the teacher asks questions in class, it helps me remember better.

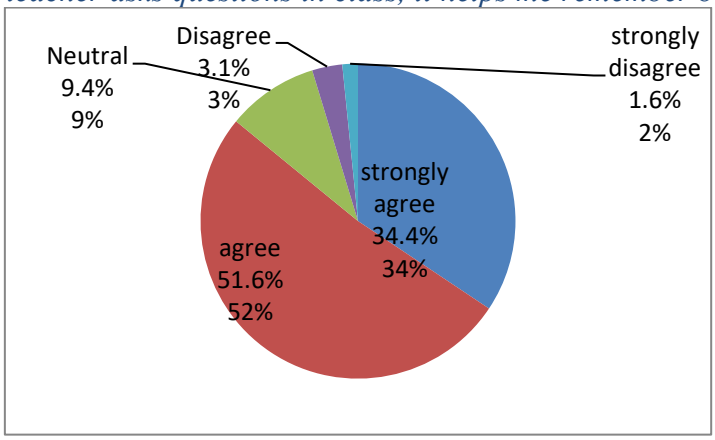

Figure 3: Getting marks and comments on quizzes makes me want to study more. It can motivate me for further study.

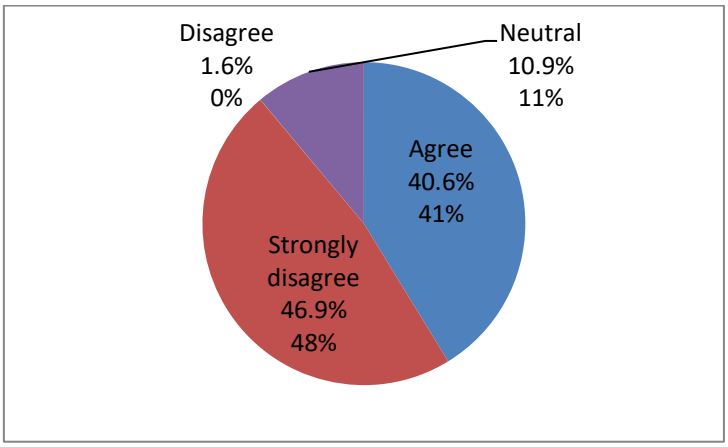

Figure 4: Giving presentations in class helps me feel more confident.

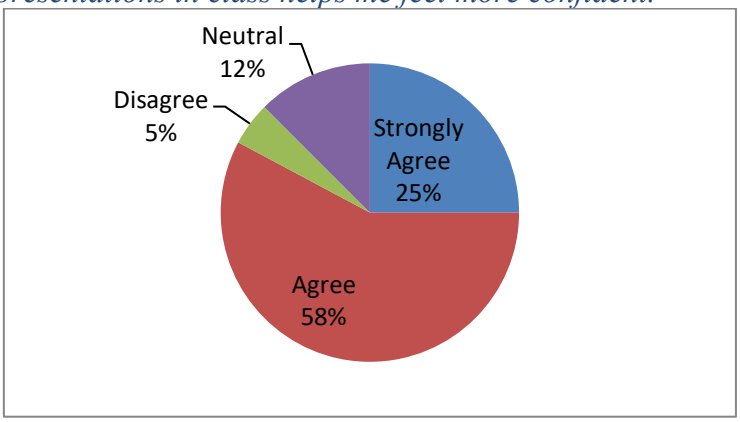

Figure 5 When my classmates give me feedback, I understand my mistakes better.

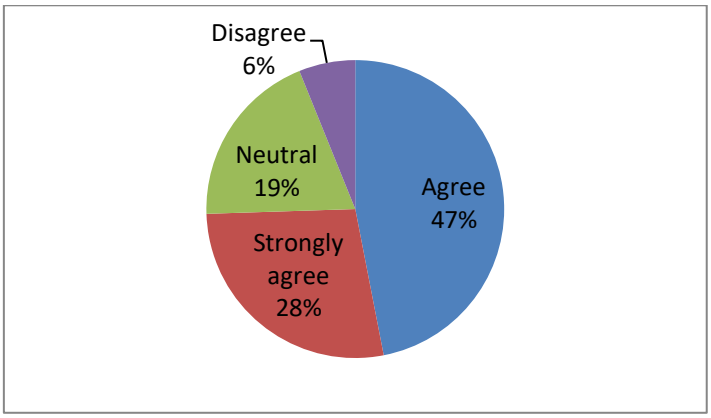

Figure 6: Working in groups makes me enjoy the class more and learn better.

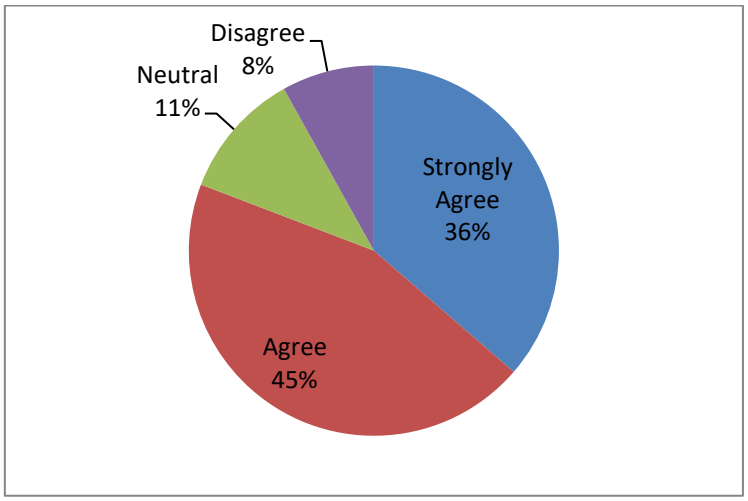

Figure 7 Presentations, projects and peer feedback make me think more deeply than normal quizzes.

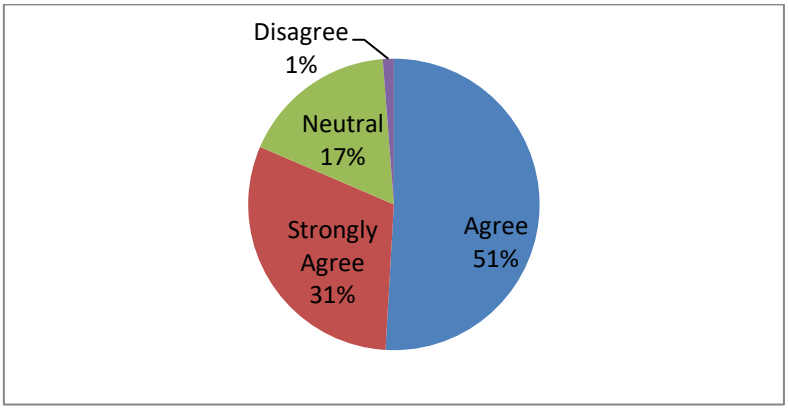

Figure 8 Normal quizzes and tests show my real knowledge more correctly.

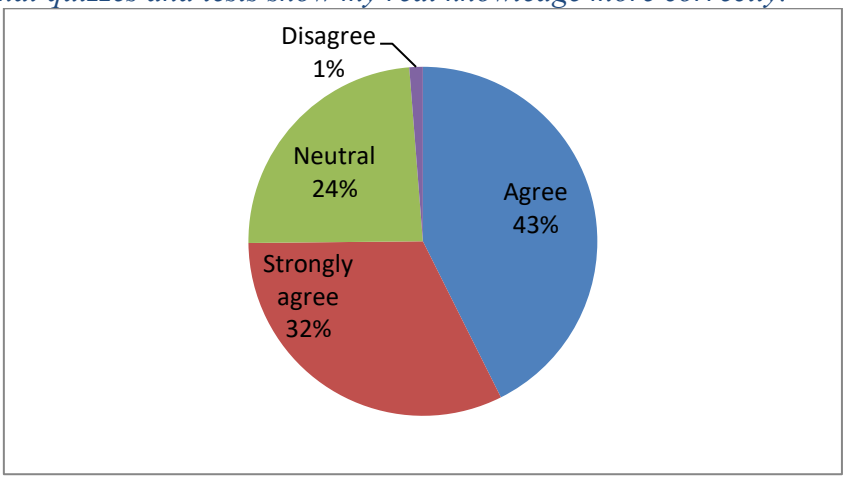

Figure 9 I feel more interested and active in class when teachers use presentations, projects or group work for checking.

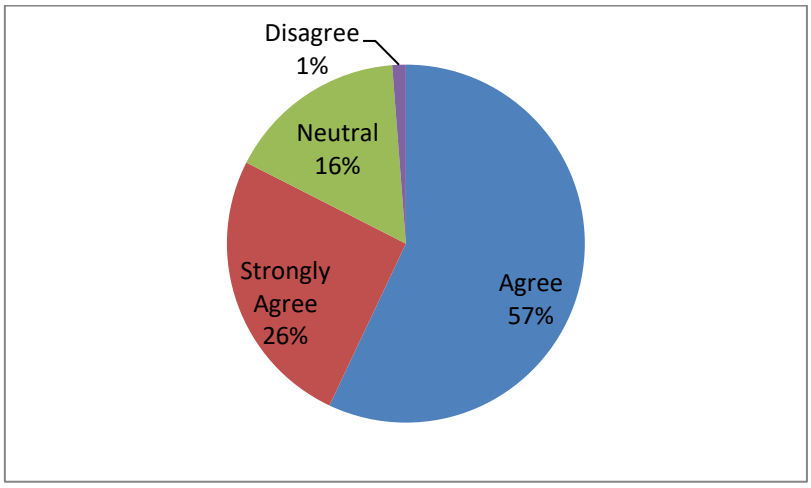

Figure 10: Using both standard quizzes and other methods (such as projects and feedback) helps me learn most effectively.

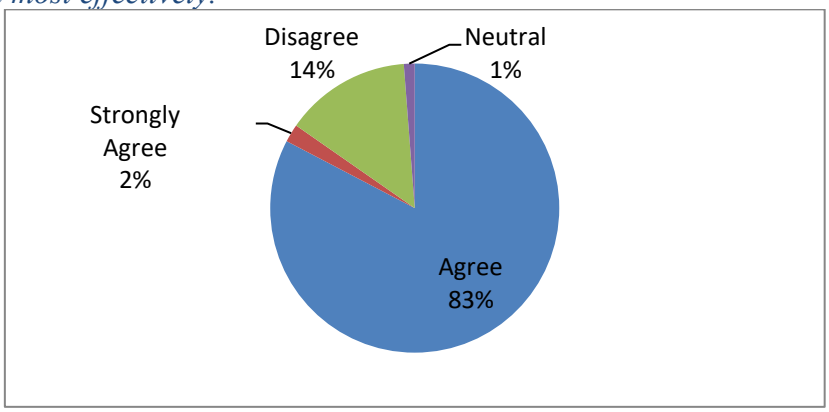

Figure 11 Traditional assignments improve my knowledge of the topic.

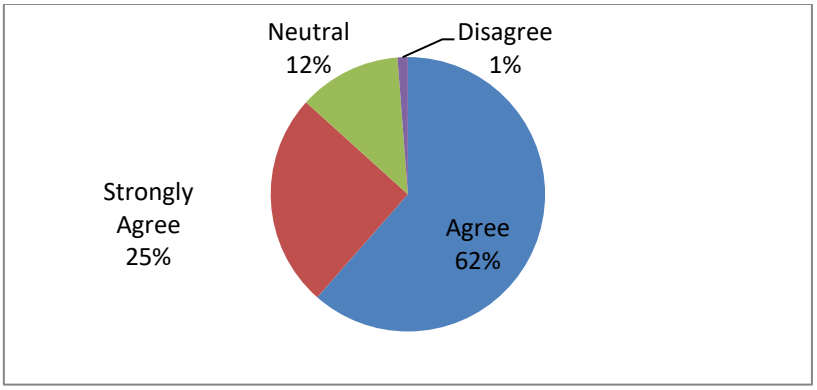

Figure 12 I feel comfortable being assessed through written tests and quizzes

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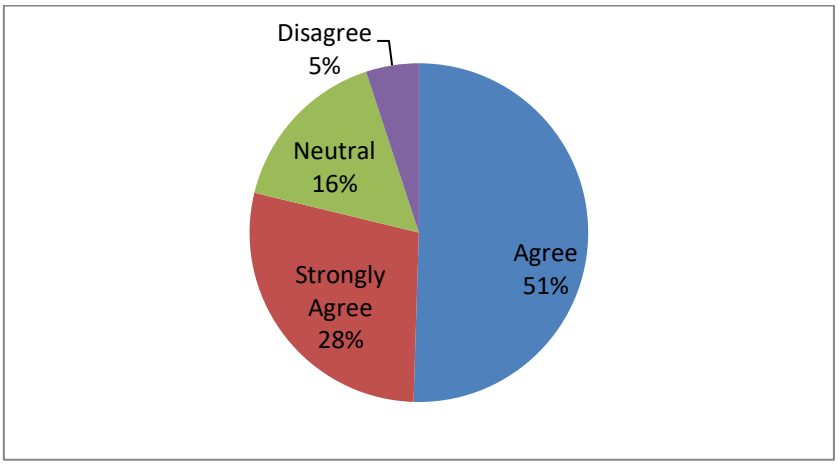

Figure 13: Traditional formative assessments (exams at the end of the semester) help track my academic progress during the semester.

This data was collected from 2 Pakistani universities, and descriptive analysis of 100 student responses revealed uniformly positive perceptions. Agreement rates ranged from 71.9% (group work) to 95.3% (teacher questioning). Traditional interactive methods scored highest, while alternatives remained strongly endorsed. When both types of data were combined, it became clear that scholars achieve deeper literacy through indispensable styles, while introductory skills are learned more effectively through traditional styles.

5. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

The present study aims to compare traditional and alternative assessment methods at the university level, and this study aims to highlight the influences of these methods on students' motivation, their participation, and learning skills. This study also emphasizes which approach is most suitable for university-level students. The findings indicate that university-level students perceive both categories positively, with very low rates of disagreement. This study also highlights the differences between the two studies. The interactive traditional method, including class quizzes and teacher questioning, emerged as particularly effective for rapid understanding, as it was motivated by feedback and positive remarks from the teacher (90-95% agreement). Alternative methods, including presentations, projects, peer group observation and discussion, are used to build a student's confidence (87.5%). These methods are also helpful for clarifying mistakes through peers (82.8%) and motivating students to think deeply (79.7%). These findings resonate with active learning research, where collaborative tasks and peer processes promote interaction and higher skills. Group work, though the lowest-rated (71.9%), still received majority support, with reports of benefits.

This research emphasizes that no single method dominated unequivocally; interactive traditional elements scored highest for immediate cognitive benefits, while alternative methods excelled in terms of effectiveness. Both methods influence motivation and skills, but in different ways. A difference lies in the focus on immediate vs deeper learning and in supporting complementarity rather than opposition.

These results are particularly relevant in contexts such as Pakistan, where traditional methods predominate and students are open to alternatives.

6. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this study have significant practical, theoretical, and policy implications for higher education, particularly in Pakistan, where traditional assessment dominates. Practically, the positive

feedback on students' perceptions (71.9–95.3% agreement across all items) demonstrates that university teachers should adopt hybrid formative assessment models that combine interactive traditional methods (short in-class quizzes and teacher questioning) with alternative approaches (presentations, projects, peer feedback, and group work). Such blending directly addresses the research objective of identifying the most suitable assessment type at university level: no single method emerged as superior, but the complementarity of both—traditional for quick understanding, retention, and accurate demonstration of knowledge (means 4.14–4.27), and alternative for confidence-building, deeper thinking, and motivation (means 3.84–4.31)—makes the hybrid approach optimal. Teachers can immediately implement low-effort changes, such as adding 5-minute quizzes followed by peer feedback or group presentations, to increase student interest and participation, as the data show.

This study successfully achieved its core objectives by comparing traditional and alternative formative assessment methods at the university level and evaluating their effects on student motivation, participation, and learning skills. Through descriptive analysis of 100 students' responses to an online questionnaire, the research revealed uniformly high endorsement of both approaches, with interactive traditional methods (short quizzes and teacher questioning) scoring highest for immediate comprehension and retention (90–95% agreement), and alternative methods (presentations, projects, and peer feedback) excelling in building confidence, deeper thinking, and enjoyment (72–88% agreement). These patterns directly answered the research questions: a blended hybrid model emerges as the most suitable assessment type; formative assessment demonstrably increases student interest and motivation; and the two methods differ in focus yet complement each other, traditional for reliability and quick feedback, alternative for engagement and higher-order skills.

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