

## **Students' Perceptions of Learning-Oriented vs. Performance-Oriented Assessment Environments in ESL Primary Classrooms in Malaysia**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study investigates the perceptions of primary ESL students regarding learning-oriented and performance-oriented assessment environments in their classrooms. A total of 100 students from different schools responded to the Students' Perceptions of the Classroom Assessment Environment Scale (Alkharusi, 2011). The findings highlighted some of the main differences between the two approaches. In the learning-oriented environment, students valued teacher feedback, opportunities for self-correction, critical thinking, and activities relevant to their daily lives. This environment was related to more engagement, motivation, and general performance in school. Perceptions of the performance-oriented environment were mixed; students had concerns regarding the emphasis on grading, fairness, and the comparative nature of assessments. Many students still reported that tasks were appropriate for their level and related to classroom learning. The study underscores the importance of developing a supportive classroom assessment design that balances performance measurement with developmental support to improve students' learning experiences.

*Keywords:* Classroom assessment, learning-oriented environment, performance-oriented environment, students' perceptions, English as a second language (ESL)

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

A related series of measures that are used to determine a complex attribute of an individual or group of individuals is what is referred to as assessment (Brown, 1990). In this context, assessment can be understood as the documentation or observation of the growth or progress of an individual, especially in learning. Empirically, assessments are used to ascertain and understand the strengths, weaknesses, and individuality of students so that strategies can be designed and implemented for further advancement.

Formative assessment is a part of the process of teaching and learning. It is a continuous way of appraising students' understanding of what has been taught. Unlike summative assessments, which are usually given at the close of a learning period, formative assessments occur continuously, allowing teachers to assess students' comprehension during instruction (Black & Wiliam, 1998). This process provides immediate feedback that enables educators to address students' weaknesses and adjust teaching methodologies accordingly.

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The shift in the Malaysian English syllabus with the implementation of School-Based Assessment (SBA) since 2011 moves from traditional summative assessment towards formative approaches was to adjust assessment practices according to 21st-century educational goals (Joachim & Hashim, 2021). SBA focuses on incorporating assessment into teaching and learning with great emphasis on teachers' knowledge and competence in planning and implementing suitable assessment strategies (Tajeddin *et al.*, 2022).

The move towards formative assessment under SBA exemplifies how national education policies are informed by educational theories, particularly those distinguishing learning-oriented from performance-oriented assessment environments. The theoretical frameworks underpinning learning-oriented and performance-oriented environments draw from socio-constructivist theories. Learning-oriented assessments prioritise student growth, engagement, and self-regulation, fostering a supportive and feedback-rich environment. Conversely, performance-oriented environments, influenced by the behaviourist theories, emphasise external rewards, competition, and measurable outcomes. These contrasting frameworks provide a foundation for understanding students' perceptions of assessment environments and their impact on learning.

Studies have explored formative and summative assessment impact globally, nonetheless, limited research addresses how young Malaysian ESL learners perceive these assessment styles within their cultural and curricular context.

1. What are the Malaysian primary ESL students' perceptions of learning-oriented assessment environments?
2. What are their perceptions of performance-oriented assessment environments?

This research adds to the expanding literature on assessment by highlighting the perspective of the students in developing inclusive and effective classroom assessment methods in Malaysia.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Learning-oriented assessment (LOA) emphasises student development, feedback, and self-regulation in learning (Carless, 2007; Andrade, 2019). It is deeply rooted in socio-constructivist theory, which promotes learner agency and formative feedback (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Understanding both approaches is crucial, as each shapes the classroom climate and student motivation in distinct ways—learning-oriented assessment promotes intrinsic motivation, while performance-oriented assessment often relies on extrinsic rewards. Performance-oriented assessment, on the other hand, focuses on external validation through grading and ranking, often linked to behaviourist approaches (Gulikers *et al.*, 2004). This type of environment may encourage competition, which can increase pressure among young learners (Akram, 2019).

To gain a clearer understanding of how students perceive these different assessment environments, various instruments have been developed to measure their responses and attitudes. A scale developed by Alkharussi (2008) was able to distinguish between students' perceptions of task-oriented and ego-oriented assessment practices related to academic performance. The investigation conducted by Alkharussi *et al.* (2012) also explored the relationship between perceived classroom assessment

environments and self-efficacy, whereby, through these, researchers can establish how assessment practices bear on students' confidence in their ability.

Later research applied the scale across cultures to develop further knowledge concerning its generalizability. For example, Panadero and Jonsson (2013) probed the role of formative assessment practices in learning strategies and student self-regulation and the impact of the assessment environment on deeper learning. Similarly, Peterson and Irving (2008) utilised the scale for an investigation of the relationship of teacher feedback to the academic self-concept of students, for they emphasised the role of facilitative assessment for better student results.

Further research develops this concept. Lin and Lu (2017) discussed the interrelation between self-assessment and motivation among students at the primary level and established that a positive assessment environment improves students' results. Gyllander Torkildsen and Erickson (2016) stressed the aspect of feedback that contributes to the notion of fairness and transparency of assessment among students. In other words, such studies call for an adjustment in assessment approaches that suit the requirements of the learners.

This review establishes a need to conduct further research to help understand how classroom-based assessments influence student learning experiences in diverse cultural and educational settings. Despite the rapidly growing literature on these dynamics, little exploration was implemented in the Malaysian ESL context. It is by drawing on these perspectives that this study contributes to the greater discourse of effective assessment practices.

### 3.0 METHOD

This study employed a survey research design to explore primary ESL students' perceptions of learning-oriented and performance-oriented assessment environments. The purposive sampling method was used to select 100 participants from various schools. Selection criteria included students currently enrolled in primary schools with English as a subject and exposure to classroom-based assessments. The sample included students from different demographic backgrounds to ensure diversity.

100 participants were chosen on social research minimum sample recommendations for survey tools (Creswell, 2012), which ensured stable descriptive analysis across subgroups. Although Alkharusi (2011) reported high reliability, we also conducted a pilot test among 30 students to re-test internal consistency within our context (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.82$  for LOA and  $0.80$  for POA). This testified to the appropriateness of the instrument for Malaysian primary ESL pupils.

The data collection process involved administering the Students' Perceptions of the Classroom Assessment Environment Scale (Alkharussi, 2011) during in-person classroom sessions. Informed consent was obtained from both students and their guardians, and ethical clearance was secured prior to the study. The survey was conducted in a controlled environment to ensure consistency and reduce potential biases.

The scale consists of two sections: items measuring perceptions of learning-oriented environments (e.g., teacher feedback, relevance of activities) and items measuring perceptions of performance-oriented environments (e.g., focus on grades, comparative assessments). Each item corresponds to specific constructs, such as engagement, self-regulation, or fairness, and was rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The instrument's reliability and validity have been established in prior studies. Alkharussi (2011) reported high internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha >$



For Item 2, a significant number of students either agree (41%) or strongly agree (34%) that the teacher assists them in identifying areas necessitating improvement, while only a small percentage express disagreement (4%) or strong disagreement (2%). This result indicated that the majority of the students believed that their teachers assisted and provided guidance to help them identify weaknesses and work on their growth. Meanwhile, for Item 7, the total scores of 47% strongly agree and 25% agree portrayed the teachers' ability to let the students know the purpose of learning. The second-highest mean value was recorded for Item 5 with a mean of 3.89 and a standard deviation of 1.231. This item denotes the opportunities to make mistakes, and from the scores, 40% of the students strongly agree that they were given a chance to correct their mistakes in the class.

Following, 45% of the students agreed that the assignments and tests given encouraged their thinking. This idea, reflected in Item 3, scored a mean of 3.74, and the standard deviation is 1.097. Apart, students recorded high agreement to Item 6, with the percentage of 42% agreeing and 21% of the students strongly agreeing that the assignments and activities given in the class were related to their everyday lives. Next, Item 1 which highlights the identification of students' strengths in English, received a total of 59% scores from both strongly agree and agree responses. The standard deviation was recorded at 0.919, which indicated that most students' responses are closer to the mean, suggesting that there is a strong unanimity among students in responding to this question.

In response to Item 4, the students provided an average rating of 3.60, with a standard deviation of 1.073, indicating agreement among students regarding the reception of ongoing feedback from their teachers about their performance in English. A total of 42% of the respondents agree, while 19% strongly agree with Item 4, yet 6% of the respondents shared their strong disagreement. A mixed response from the respondents for Item 8 was recorded. This item enquires about the variation of ways used by their teachers to assess their understanding of the subject. Even though quite some students responded with their neutrality, by 28%, yet, the scores of strongly agree and agree outnumbered the sum scores of neutral and disagree. A combined total of 59% of respondents both agreed and strongly agreed with the viewpoints presented through the diverse range of assessments implemented by their instructors within the classroom.

Finally, Item 9 recorded a notable score of disagreement of 23% and strong disagreement, 18% towards the statement of whether the assignments and tests are returned in a way that keeps individual student scores private. On top, the respondents scored ambiguously, where 30% of the students decided to be neutral.

Based on the data in Table 1, it is possible to conclude that students have a positive opinion of their teachers' efforts to promote learning in the classroom. Among the highlighted insights from the results are high consensus on teacher support, the importance of correcting mistakes, encouragement and relevance and privacy concerns. Aligned with Lin *et al.* (2018), a high-quality learning environment is associated with high student satisfaction and motivation. The environment exists to facilitate their learning, which was created through the efforts of their teachers.

This favourable disposition is also evident in the high value students placed on feedback that allowed them to identify areas to improve. The item, "In this class, the teacher helps us identify the areas where we need to put more effort in the future," for instance, had one of the highest mean scores ( $M = 4.01$ ,  $SD = 0.937$ ), indicating strong agreement on the students' part. Similarly, the opportunity to rectify mistakes was emphasised in the sentence, "In this class, I have an opportunity to rectify my mistakes," which was also viewed positively ( $M = 3.86$ ,  $SD = 1.231$ ). These results collectively indicate that students not only appreciate encouragement from their teachers but also recognise the importance of constructive feedback in enhancing their learning experience.

Critical thinking was also highlighted, with 45% of students agreeing and 24% strongly agreeing that "the assignments and tests encourage thinking" ( $M = 3.74$ ,  $SD = 1.097$ ). These findings underscore the importance of a supportive environment that promotes self-regulation and engagement. Students also appreciated the relevance of classroom tasks to their everyday lives, as shown in the statement, "In this class, the assignments and activities are related to my everyday lives" ( $M = 3.68$ ,  $SD = 1.024$ ).

4.2 Performance-Oriented Environment

In this section, the students’ perceptions of a performance-oriented assessment environment were analysed based on the data from 7 items in the instruments used. The findings are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2 Students’ perception of performance-oriented assessment environment

Item	SD %	D %	N %	A %	SA %	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. The tests and assignments in this class are difficult for me.	16	31	27	18	8	2.71	1.175
2. In this class, the teacher compares students' performances to each other.	16	24	17	25	18	3.05	1.366
3. In this class, the teacher gives more importance to the grades than to the learning.	9	29	41	14	7	2.81	1.022
4. In this class, there is a mismatch between the learned subject materials and the assigned homework and tests.	16	21	50	11	2	2.62	0.951
5. In this class, the in-class and homework assignments are not interesting.	25	37	17	14	7	2.41	1.207
6. In this class, the teacher’s grading system is not clear.	17	19	32	22	10	2.89	1.222
7. In this class, the assessment results do not fairly reflect the effort put into studying the subject.	17	41	13	17	12	2.66	1.281
Sum of means	2.74						

Table 2 presents the findings for seven items in seeking students’ perception of a performance-oriented assessment environment. Overall, Item 2 received the highest mean score of 3.05. This item lays the practice of comparison of students’ performances being made by the teachers in classes. Nonetheless, the score of disagreement was recorded at 38%, a combination of disagree and strongly disagree which impacted the accumulation of the standard deviation score at 1.366. This shows that students have mixed perceptions towards the practice in the English classes.

The second highest mean value was scored by Item 6 at 2.89. It was recorded that 32% of the students were neutral about how they felt about their teachers’ unclear grading system which indicated that the

students are undecided of the practice. With a close connection to the indecision score, Item 4 recorded that 50% of the students took a neutral stance about the mismatch between the learned subject materials and the assigned homework and tests. Next, Item 3 also shows a high percentage of students who were neutral about the statement. The 'Neutral' score was recorded at 41% revolving around whether their teachers had been giving more importance to the grades than the learning in their class.

On a different note, 37% of the students disagreed with Item 5, which touches on the dull homework assignments. The mean value, 2.41 indicated a strong view that the homework and assignments given were interesting. Finally, Item 7 was scored second in disagreement where a total of 58% 'Disagree' and 'Strongly Disagree' with the statement that the assessment results do not fairly reflect the effort put into studying the subject.

Based on the analysis of all the items, the conclusions derived from the responses are 1) the students were given suitable tasks and assignments for their level, 2) the tasks were interesting and related to what they have learnt in the class. The students, however, remained of the view that they were given fair marks even though they were indecisive about their grading system and that their grades reflected their respective performance and efforts in the subject.

Concurrent with the findings of the present study, the responses from the participants spoke volumes of the importance of feedback, support, the highlight of purpose to learn, and the understanding and identification of areas to improve. Hence, classroom-based assessment should be conducted and should represent a less stressful evaluation as compared to the traditional summative evaluation. The findings align closely with the study by Cavanagh *et al.* (2005) where students' perceptions of classroom assessments include five key elements, including the alignment of the assessment with lesson plans, authenticity, student input, transparency, and consideration of the variety of the students.

In learning-oriented classrooms, a friendly, open atmosphere is often developed that puts students at ease about asking questions and expressing themselves (Freeman *et al.*, 2014). It is this kind of psychological stability that leads to an educational experience that is successful because anxiety is reduced and intellectual self-confidence is heightened. On the other hand, Gulikers *et al.*, (2004) added that for an effective classroom-based assessment, there should be clearly defined learning objectives and criteria for assessment. These should be clearly explained to the students by the teachers to ensure that they are aware of the expectations.

When learning objectives are aligned with the evaluation criteria, then students know what is expected from them, and hence they can focus their efforts on attaining those objectives. According to Biggs & Tang (2011), this consistency leads to an integrated learning experience whereby activities undertaken for assessment directly reflect desired objectives.

Looking into performance-oriented classroom assessments, there are measures to be taken into account such as varying the types of assignments or assessments in promoting a conducive and encouraging learning environment. A great emphasis should be placed on diminishing the practice of comparing students' performances to each other as it would spark anxiety and hinder students' motivation to learn. Planning and implementing individualised and differentiated instructional strategies and assessments could be assistive in developing students' potential for learning.

The findings for the performance-oriented environment revealed a mix of perspectives. The statement, "In this class, the teacher compares students' performances to each other," received varied responses, with a mean score of 3.05 (SD = 1.366). While some students acknowledged this practice, others expressed concerns about its fairness and impact on motivation.

Grading practices also elicited mixed feelings. The statement, "In this class, the teacher's grading system is not clear," recorded a mean of 2.89 (SD = 1.222), reflecting students' uncertainty about the criteria used for assessment. Similarly, students were divided on whether "the assessment results fairly reflect the effort put into studying the subject," with 58% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing (M = 2.66, SD = 1.281). Despite these concerns, students acknowledged the relevance and suitability of tasks. The statement, "The tests and assignments in this class are difficult for me," recorded a mean of 2.71 (SD = 1.175), indicating that most students found the tasks manageable and aligned with their learning levels.

The finding that students valued actionable feedback aligns with Lin and Lu (2017), who emphasised that self-assessment and support from teachers optimise motivation for young learners. Moreover, the conflicting impressions by students about fairness in grading resonate with the concerns of Gulikers *et al.* (2004) about transparency in assessment practice. These findings highlight the need to balance performance measurement with developmental support. Teachers should ensure transparency in grading and minimise practices that might discourage student motivation, such as direct comparisons of performance.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

This study investigates primary ESL students' perceptions of learning-oriented and performance-oriented assessment environments, emphasizing the significance of teacher feedback, task relevance, and opportunities for self-correction. The findings highlight that students highly value assessments that promote reflection, critical thinking, and connections to real-life contexts, which aligns with socio-constructivist theories of learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; 2018). Conversely, concerns regarding privacy and inconsistent feedback underscore the need for policy-level reforms and teacher training programs.

The broader implications for educational policy suggest that integrating formative assessments into classroom practices is crucial to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes. Policymakers should prioritize teacher development programs focused on designing learning-oriented environments that nurture student agency and support their growth (Carless, 2015; Andrade, 2019). Additionally, privacy concerns in assessments must be addressed through school-wide protocols to foster trust and inclusivity in the classroom.

This study's findings reaffirm the necessity of understanding students' perceptions as a cornerstone for creating balanced assessment environments. These environments must not only evaluate student performance but also support developmental growth, preparing students for lifelong learning and adaptability. Learning-oriented assessments foster motivation and student engagement, particularly through feedback and task relevance. Despite the various perspectives of stakeholders, including educators and practitioners, the implementation of performance-oriented environments has produced mixed outcomes. This inconsistency highlights the necessity for a thoughtful and deliberate approach to implementation. It is crucial to consider the specific needs of each environment and the diverse factors that can influence performance results. By examining these elements closely, stakeholders can develop strategies that not only enhance effectiveness but also align with the goals of all participants involved.



## 5.1 Recommendations

### 5.1.1 *Recommendations for Practice*

The findings provide areas of exploration and improvement in the progress of professional growth for teachers, particularly ESL teachers. Teachers should receive ongoing training on implementing learning-oriented assessment strategies, particularly those emphasising actionable feedback and real-world task relevance (Brookhart, 2017; Black & Wiliam, 2018). Responses received from the young students revealed the importance of feedback and connection to real-world activities as these impact their views on assessments and the purposes of learning.

On another note, schools are encouraged to maintain a dual focus on learning-oriented and performance-oriented assessment approaches, ensuring that performance measurement does not overshadow developmental support (Andrade, 2019). Both learning and performance-oriented assessments are equally essential in students' academic growth. Nonetheless, in the pursuit of learning, the psychological growth of a student plays a big role in academic success. A conducive and supportive assessment environment and a clear direction of teaching and learning infused into the assessment will benefit the learners.

### 5.1.2 *Recommendations for Future Studies*

This study and its findings provide room for improvements for future researchers to delve deeper into longitudinal studies. In a longitudinal study, researchers will be able to examine the long-term impact of learning-oriented assessment environments on student motivation, engagement, and academic performance (Carless & Boud, 2018).

Besides, an investigation of students' perceptions in varied cultural and educational contexts would provide insights into how assessment practices influence learning globally (Kim & Schallert, 2014). Future studies may include comparisons of responses from participants studying in different localities, background knowledge, and also socioeconomic status may provide interesting and novel findings about the views on assessments.

In addition, with the advancement of technological integration, future studies can research digital tools, such as AI-driven feedback systems, could explore their potential to enhance feedback delivery and maintain assessment confidentiality (Hooda *et al.*, 2022) These would provide new insights which will be purposeful for policymakers and institutional stakeholders to improve the assessment systems conducted in schools.

By addressing these recommendations, future research can expand on this study's contributions, ultimately advancing effective and equitable assessment practices in diverse educational settings.

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## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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