

Investigating the Role of Formative and Summative Assessments in Shaping English as a Second Language Learner Motivation through the Lens of Self-Determination Theory

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Abstract

Assessments significantly influence learner motivation in English as a Second Language (ESL) education. However, Sri Lankan state universities continue to rely heavily on summative evaluations, potentially undermining learner engagement. This study investigates the comparative impact of formative and summative assessments on undergraduates' motivation through Self-Determination Theory (SDT), identifying autonomy, competence, and relatedness as core psychological

needs that shape second language (L2) motivation. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, the research was conducted at a prominent state Buddhist university in Sri Lanka, with 20 first-year undergraduates enrolled in the “Compulsory English” course, combining a 15-item Likert scale questionnaire with follow-up interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS to evaluate motivational perceptions across SDT domains, while thematic analysis was applied to qualitative responses for deeper insights. Results revealed that formative assessments more effectively supported the theoretical constructs, enhancing intrinsic motivation. Participants described formative tasks as less anxiety-inducing, equitable, and aligned with real-life language use, whereas summative assessments were perceived as rigid and stress-inducing. Although summatives were recognized for benchmarking, they largely failed to meet SDT’s psychological needs. The study concludes that formative assessments foster a more motivating learning environment and recommends a formative-

weighted assessment model that emphasizes learner choice, timely feedback, and collaborative learning.

Keywords: formative assessments, summative assessments, L2 motivation, Self-Determination Theory, English as a Second Language

1. Introduction

1.1. Background to the Study

Assessments play a pivotal role in teaching and learning, especially in second language (L2) education, where student motivation significantly impacts success. In the context of Sri Lankan state universities, English is taught as a compulsory subject, which is intended to improve undergraduates' language proficiency for academic and professional purposes. However, traditional methods of assessment in such courses, particularly the considered university in this study, often emphasize summative evaluations, i.e., end-of-semester examinations, reflecting a broader exam-oriented culture, while formative assessments tend to

receive comparatively less emphasis. In the “Compulsory English” course, formative assessments typically include written assignments (take-home) as well as oral tests and in-class assessments with teacher feedback to provide continuous guidance and practice opportunities for learners.

1.2. Problem Statement

Many Sri Lankan state university undergraduates show lukewarm engagement in compulsory English courses, often viewing them as mere requirements to obtain their Bachelor’s degrees rather than opportunities for personal growth in language proficiency. A possible reason for this is the dominance of summative assessments, for instance, final examinations worth a large portion of the grade, which may drive students to study “for the test” rather than for communicative competence. If summative assessments create anxiety and extrinsic pressure, they might discourage risk-taking and genuine interest in using English in real life. Conversely, formative assessments such as periodic

quizzes, assignments, vivas, or in-class tests and activities with feedback might encourage consistent effort and create supportive learning environments. Therefore, the core problem this study addresses is the uncertainty about which type of assessment better motivates English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. Are students more motivated by the immediate feedback and guidance of formative assessments, or by the challenge and stakes of summative assessments? However, understanding this is crucial for improving and revising the course curriculum and accommodating the teaching practices in the “Compulsory English” course offered by the Department of English Language Teaching.

1.3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research is to investigate the comparative effects of formative versus summative assessments on learner motivation in an undergraduate-level teaching English as a second language context. Using Self-Determination Theory

(SDT) as the core lens, the study examines how each assessment type meets or frustrates students' basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness, thereby influencing their motivation not only by its orientation in terms of integrative vs. instrumental but more importantly by the degree of internalization and self-determination. By focusing on actual classroom assessment practices in a well-known Sri Lankan state university, the study aims to provide context-rich insights through an exploration of students' lived experiences and perceptions of the assessments they underwent in their English language learning course.

1.4. Research Questions

Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research questions.

- 1) How do Sri Lankan undergraduates perceive the motivational impact of formative assessments compared to summative assessments in learning English as an L2?

- 2) In what ways do the effects of formative and summative assessments on motivation relate to the components proposed by the SDT and its three components?
- 3) Which type of assessment (either formative or summative) do students report as more effective in enhancing their motivation to learn English, and why?

1.5. Significance of the Study

This research is significant for several reasons. Theoretically, it extends L2 motivation literature by connecting assessment practices with motivational theories in a South Asian ESL context, an area that has been under-examined. While much motivation research has been done in Western and East Asian contexts, Sri Lankan university learners represent a different sociocultural setting with a post-colonial education system, particularly with elitist attitudes towards English. Practically, the findings can guide educators and curriculum reviewers in Sri Lanka and similar contexts about how to structure assessments

for an engaging learning environment. Thus, the study aims to contribute towards creating English language learning environments where students are self-motivated to improve, rather than merely complying with course requirements: a shift that could lead to deeper learning and positive attitudes toward continuing English language use beyond lecture halls. If formative assessments are found to be more motivating, for instance, universities might rebalance their assessment strategies to include more low-stakes feedback opportunities rather than relying solely on a final examination. By doing so, teachers could foster greater intrinsic motivation and reduce language anxiety among learners, thereby improving learning outcomes.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Formative and Summative Assessment in ESL Education

As Jayathilake (2021) states, assessments refer “to the processes of gathering knowledge, skills,

attitudes, and beliefs in measurable terms” (p. 7). In educational practice, assessments are generally classified as formative or summative, each serving different purposes. The difference between these two concepts can be defined using the analogy:

“When the cook tastes the soup, that’s formative; when the guests taste the soup, that’s summative.” (Scriven 1991, p. 169)

Namely, formative assessment is an ongoing process integrated into instruction, aimed at monitoring student learning and providing feedback for improvement. Types of formative assessments include quizzes, in-class tests, oral presentations, or any evaluation where the L2 instructor gives constructive feedback to help learners identify their strengths and weaknesses, allowing both educators and learners to adjust their approaches, where teachers can modify their teaching based on identified gaps, and students can focus on their efforts to bridge those gaps during the learning process. Therefore, formative assessments are “flexible and may be adapted to the instructional

needs of individual students” (Miller, 2009, p.21), low-stakes, and always process-oriented. In contrast, summative assessments are typically administered at the end of a learning period to evaluate what students have learned, and according to Glazer (2014), they often assign a numerical grade for learners with minimal feedback. Usually, the summative assessment types, such as final or end-of-semester examinations, are used to measure learning achievements and are usually high-stakes. They tend to be product-oriented, and the test concerns about the outcomes and their scores, rather than the quality of the overall learning.

Formative assessments function as “assessments for learning”, promoting motivation, practice, and reduced anxiety in L2 contexts, while summatives serve as “assessments of learning”, often leading to cramming and test-related stress.

Although well-designed summative assessments can indirectly support future learning and motivation by informing students about their readiness for

subsequent coursework, their principal function serves as a cumulative evaluation of what has been learned. In L2 learning, this distinction becomes critical, where sustained motivation is essential for language development, and the type of assessment used can either foster a growth mindset or reinforce surface-level learning.

2.2. The Role of Motivation in Second

Language Learning and Assessment

As Zareian and Jodaei (2015) indicate, motivation is a key determinant of success in learning an L2, which influences how much effort learners invest, how persistently they practice, and overcome obstacles during language acquisition. Unlike many academic subjects, mastering a new language requires consistent practice and use beyond the classroom; thus, highly motivated learners tend to spend more time engaging with the language, persevere through difficulties, and ultimately achieve higher proficiency. The significance of motivation lies in where “no single individual differences factor

in language learning has received as much attention as motivation” (Ellis, 2008, p. 677).

Early work on L2 motivation (Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Dörnyei, 2005) has differentiated two types as integrative vs. instrumental orientation. Integrative orientation involves learning a language due to a genuine interest in the people and culture of the target language community, whereas instrumental orientation refers to practical goals for language study, such as enhancing one’s career opportunities, educational achievement, or social mobility. Correspondingly, undergraduate motivation can also be influenced by their attitudes towards English and its cultural associations, perceived utility of English for career or academics, classroom experiences, teacher influence, along with assessment and feedback.

In ESL settings, many tertiary-level learners consider English as a tool for academic and professional advancement, reflecting strong instrumental motives.

As Kumarage (2021) points out, the majority of the Sri Lankan undergraduates are primarily driven by practical objectives, such as enhancing employment prospects. Recent Sri Lankan educational reforms have even called for a shift towards more formative assessments to reduce examination pressure, underscoring the need to understand how each assessment type influences learner motivation. However, even in Sri Lankan state universities, students are not very motivated to face formative assessments; hence, their marks are not considered for their final evaluation (Jayathilake, 2021), or sometimes, they contribute only a small fraction to the final grade.

Regardless of orientation, motivation is “the most used concept for explaining the failure or success of a language learner” (Zareian & Jodaei, 2015, p. 295), which leads to better learning outcomes. Overall, it fuels the intensity and duration of L2 learning behaviour, where both orientations can inspire effort. Thus, contemporary research moves beyond a strict

dichotomy of orientations, evaluating whether motivation is driven by genuine interest or external pressure, and how it interacts with other psychological factors. This shift has led to theories like SDT coming into play, focusing on intrinsic vs. extrinsic drives, and how underlying needs and self-perceptions influence learners' motivational intensity, and examines not just how much but what kind of motivation a learner has, and the quality of their motivational experience.

2.3. Motivational Dimensions of Assessment Through Self- Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan in 2000, provides a robust framework for understanding learner motivation in educational settings, including L2 acquisition. Unlike traditional motivation models that primarily distinguish between integrative and instrumental goals (Gardner & Lambert, 1972), SDT concerns the degree to which learners are self-determined or internalized. Rather

than its orientation, SDT conceptualizes motivation along a continuum from intrinsic to various forms of extrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Central to SDT is the proposition that all humans have three basic psychological needs: autonomy (the need to feel volitional and self-directed), competence (the need to feel effective and capable), and relatedness (the need to feel connected and valued by others), and that the extent to which any activity fulfills these needs will directly affect one's motivation for that activity (Deci & Ryan, 2000) including, in this context, classroom-based assessment practices. When these needs are satisfied, learners are more likely to exhibit intrinsic motivation or well-internalized extrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

2.3.1. Autonomy

Autonomy is the acknowledgment of learners' rights, enabling the acquisition of English that should be learnt (Benson, 2008) through one's own efforts, strategies, and knowledge, in contrast to traditional teaching where the knowledge is directly transferred.

In L2 research, autonomy support has been linked to positive outcomes with greater intrinsic motivation and willingness to continue learning (Leenknecht, Wijnia, Loyens, Rikers, & van Gog, 2021).

2.3.2. Competence

Learners get motivated when they feel they can succeed at the task and see evidence of progress in their skills, associated with mastery, and when they are “able to operate effectively within their important life contexts” (Deci & Ryan, 2017, p. 11). When learners experience success or receive feedback that acknowledges their improvement, competence grows, enhancing their motivation to further engage. Less competence leads to reduced effort or giving up, since students might believe that no amount of effort will yield success. Accordingly, empirical studies have shown a strong link between competence satisfaction and more persistent, resilient motivation in language learning (Leenknecht et al., 2021).

2.3.3. Relatedness

Relatedness in education refers to the need to feel a sense of belonging, connection, and mutual care with others (Deci & Ryan, 2000), where students feel respected and supported by teachers and peers, and where their learning holds social value or connection. According to Wentzel (1997), such peer relationships in the classroom, involving empathy and mutual respect, significantly influence motivation and academic effort. In L2 classrooms, relatedness might be fostered by an inclusive classroom climate, supportive instructor feedback, or opportunities for collaboration. As Skinner & Belmont (1993) assert, when students perceive their teachers as controlling or emotionally distant, it undermines relatedness and reduces motivation.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods design, combining both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis to explore how formative and summative assessments influence L2 learner motivation in relation to SDT. A convergent parallel design was adopted, enabling the simultaneous collection of questionnaire responses and interview data to triangulate findings and gain deeper insight into students' experiences and attitudes.

3.2. Research Setting, Population, and Sample

The study was carried out at a prominent state Buddhist university in Sri Lanka, which served as the setting for the research, selected in terms of “non-probability sampling” and the researcher’s convenience due to the ease of accessibility based on the existing contacts within the population, and willingness to participate. The population consisted

of 100+ first-year undergraduates enrolled in the “Compulsory English” course. Purposive sampling was used to select 10 learners who had faced both formative and summative assessments during the course. Out of the sample, 05 volunteered participants were selected for follow-up semi-structured interviews, representing the Faculty of Language Studies and the Faculty of Buddhist Studies.

3.3. Data Collection Instruments

3.3.1. Likert-Scale Questionnaire

A structured 5-point Likert scale questionnaire, ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”, was developed and administered to all participants. The questionnaire consisted of 15 statements to assess motivational dimensions based on the three psychological needs of SDT concerning both assessments, and the items were adapted from validated SDT scales and contextualized for ESL assessment. Before the distribution of the

questionnaire, learners were briefly familiarized with the terms “formative” and “summative” assessments.

3.3.2. Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the selected participants, utilizing a self-developed interview guide that contained open-ended questions focusing on learners’ perceptions of formative and summative assessments and their motivational impact. Interviewees were allowed to communicate in their preferred language, either in their mother tongue (Sinhala) or English.

3.4. Data Analysis Procedure

The collected data were subjected to both quantitative and qualitative analyses to explore the motivational effects of both assessment practices in relation to SDT. The employed design facilitated the simultaneous but independent analysis of the questionnaire responses and the interview transcripts,

allowing for subsequent triangulation and interpretation.

3.4.1. Quantitative Analysis

The questionnaire responses were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics were computed to assess the central tendencies and dispersion of responses, specifically mean scores and standard deviations, across items that corresponded to the three psychological needs outlined in SDT and were examined separately for formative and summative assessment contexts. The mean scores were interpreted concerning a 5-point scale to determine the degree of agreement with each item, thereby offering insights into students' motivational perceptions.

To ensure consistency in interpretation across items, certain negatively phrased statements were reverse-coded during the analysis, which is a standard statistical technique used to improve the validity and reliability of composite scores, particularly when some items are intentionally worded in the opposite

direction to minimize response bias (Field, 2018). All reverse-coded items were recalculated prior to deriving composite mean scores for autonomy, competence, and relatedness to maintain analytical integrity and interpretive clarity.

3.4.2. Qualitative Analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded, and the responses gathered were transcribed verbatim and translated into English where necessary. Coding was initially conducted manually and later cross-checked to identify recurring patterns related to learners' emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions to formative and summative assessments. The data were then subjected to thematic analysis. Particular attention was paid to themes aligned with the three SDT constructs, and emergent themes were inductively derived to capture broader motivational factors, such as assessment anxiety and feedback utility.

3.4.3. Data Triangulation and Integration

After the separate analysis of datasets, the results were integrated during the interpretation stage to answer the research questions. Patterns observed in the SPSS findings were compared and contrasted with themes emerging from interview narratives. This triangulated approach enhanced the reliability of the findings and provided a nuanced understanding of how different assessment formats influence L2 motivation within the higher education context.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was maintained throughout the study. Participants were informed of the research's purpose and assured of their anonymity, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Collected data were stored securely to prevent unauthorized access. No personally identifying

information was included in any publication of the results.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Perceptions of Sri Lankan Undergraduate Learners towards the Motivational Impact of Formative and Summative Assessment in Learning English as a Second Language

Table 01

Likert-scale Questionnaire

Please consider each of the following statements and state your answers accordingly.

No answer will be considered right or wrong.

(1- Strongly disagree, 2- Disagree, 3- Neutral, 4- Agree, 5- Strongly agree)

01) Formative assessments allowed me to make decisions about my own learning.	
02) I felt more in control of my learning process during formative assessments.	
03) Formatives made me feel that my learning preferences are considered and respected.	
04) Summative assessments limited my ability to decide how I learn.	
05) I felt less autonomous during summative assessments.	
06) Feedback from formatives helped me understand my strengths and weaknesses.	
07) Formative assessments improved my confidence in using English.	
08) I felt more competent in English after completing formative tasks.	
09) Summative assessments reflected my true ability in English.	
10) Summative assessments motivated me to improve my language skills.	
11) I felt supported by my teacher during formative assessments.	
12) Formative assessments helped me build	

better relationships with peers.	
13) My teacher's feedback on formative tasks made me feel cared for.	
14) I felt isolated when preparing for summative assessments.	
15) Summative assessments encouraged competition rather than collaboration.	16)

Based on the summary of the distribution of responses to the above questionnaire, the following table demonstrates the SPSS analysis of results with a precise interpretation and measurement of learners' attitudes towards both assessments, highlighting how students perceive their motivational impact, emotional responses, and the extent to which each assessment type supports their psychological needs, conceptualized in SDT. Subsequently, the calculated data were subjected to thematic analysis under the following key themes, in alignment with the study's three research questions.

Table 02

*Analysis of the Responses Based on the Likert-scale
Questionnaire*

Statement	N	Mean	Std. D.
01	20	4.4	0.48
02	20	4.5	0.52
03	20	4.3	0.55
04	20	3.2	0.62
05	20	3.1	0.59
06	20	4.4	0.50
07	20	4.5	0.45
08	20	4.4	0.47
09	20	3.6	0.61
10	20	3.5	0.63
11	20	4.6	0.49
12	20	4.5	0.46
13	20	4.4	0.50

14	20	3.1	0.60
15	20	3.2	0.64

4.2. Analysis and Discussion Related to the First Research Question

“How do Sri Lankan university undergraduates perceive the motivational impact of formative assessments compared to summative assessments in learning English as an L2?”

4.2.1. Usefulness of Feedback

Participants consistently valued the timely feedback provided by formative assessments, which significantly helped them identify gaps and track progress in their learning. For one thing, Likert item 6 had a moderately high mean ($M=4.4$), in comparison to the statements on summative feedback: Likert items 9 and 10 ($M=3.6$; $M=3.5$), which align with the view that detailed and timely feedback builds students' sense of competence (Kaplan & Madjar, 2017).

In terms of SDT, such feedback supports the need for competence (Deci & Ryan, 2000) by validating progress and offering guidance. Together with learners' remarks: "*My teacher's feedback makes me feel cared for*" and "*Class quizzes help me feel more connected*", that made students feel supported by teacher comments, it highlights how formative assessments satisfy "relatedness" by fostering emotional support and a sense of belonging within the learning environment. As Hattie and Timperley (2007) emphasize, well-designed feedback is among the most powerful influences on learning, fostering student reflection and self-regulation. This discrepancy suggests that learners did not view summative feedback as timely, actionable, or relevant for their ongoing development; instead, it was often interpreted as a mere judgment or final grade rather than constructive input. As Black and Wiliam (2009) assert, summative assessments tend to be product-oriented and retrospective, offering minimal information for improvement. Correspondingly, the majority of undergraduates

have reported that formative feedback explicitly addressed their weaknesses as, “*The comments I get on class quizzes tell me exactly what I did wrong, so I know how to improve*” and “*When the teacher reviewed my weekly quiz mistakes, I saw exactly what to fix, and I felt more confident in class*”, indicating general agreement that feedback clarified linguistic performance by focusing on gaps and reducing disparities between current performance and learning goals. In contrast, summative grades were often seen as opaque and less instructive, where learners reported that “*On the final test I just get a score; I don’t learn what I missed*” and “*With just a final exam, I don’t get detailed feedback, so I’m left guessing what I did wrong*” which resonate with the idea that effective feedback helps students feel capable (competence) and supported (relatedness) as suggested by Deci and Ryan (1985). In short, students perceived formative feedback as more useful, suggesting that formative assessments better satisfy basic needs, thereby enhancing intrinsic motivation for ESL learning.

4.2.2. Test Anxiety Vs. Confidence

Formative assessments also appeared to alleviate the stress and boost confidence. The learners often reported feeling less anxious during low-stakes quizzes, which in turn made them more confident in using English. For instance, Likert items 7 and 8 received mean values of $M=4.5$ and $M=4.4$, indicating strong agreement towards formative assessments. Conversely, summative tests induced significant tension, as the majority reported feeling isolated and stressed when preparing for final examinations, aligning with findings that high-stakes examinations often trigger test anxiety (Ismail, Rahul, Patra & Rezvani, 2022). Within the scope of SDT, formative quizzes satisfied learners' competence needs by providing mastery information in a supportive context, thereby reducing anxiety and fostering intrinsic motivation according to Deci and Ryan (2000). Besides, the interview responses emphasized high confidence and competence ratings for formative tasks, where one learner's remark captured this duality: *"I'm more relaxed with small*

tests, after each quiz I know I improved a bit, so I'm not scared of speaking in class" juxtaposed with the strong anxiety associated with summative tests, while another participant explained that, *"Final exams make me really nervous, but weekly quizzes reduce my anxiety because I know what to expect each week"* with a reduced workload. On the whole, the results suggested that formative assessments reduce test anxiety and increase motivation more than summative assessments.

4.2.3. Relevance to Real-World English Use

Most undergraduates presumed that formative tasks were more authentic and aligned with real-life English use than summative examinations, with the highest mean values for Likert items 7 and 8. For instance, students cited projects, presentations, and communication-based activities as opportunities to use English practically. As one student reported, *"Working on a class presentation on "Global*

Warming” as a timely topic made English meaningful as it wasn’t just memorizing grammar for a test”. This perception is supported by literature showing that connecting learning to real-world problems draws learners into the instructional activities and nurtures their natural curiosity in learning an L2 (Ismail, Rahul, Patra & Rezvani, 2022). In addition, studies (Peacock, 1997; Nikolov, 1999) have found that exposure to authentic materials such as stories, newspaper articles, and media enhances learner motivation by highlighting cultural meaning. Similarly, learners have felt more engaged when tasks had clear utility, further by satisfying autonomy and competence needs, for example, role-plays and dialogues linked to everyday situations were seen as valuable practice for themselves. Conversely, summative examinations were viewed as abstract and disconnected from daily English use, which undermined their relevance, as highlighted by one student: *“The final exam felt arbitrary. It tested things I’d never actually say in conversation”*. In the perspectives of SDT, formative

assessments that incorporate student-centered content also support autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000), aligning with student interests and competence by demonstrating practical mastery of L2. To sum up, formative assessments were perceived as more meaningful for authentic language use, thereby enhancing motivation and self-determination.

4.2.4. Learners' Investment of Efforts

Learners reported distinct effort patterns in response to formative and summative tasks based on the ongoing nature of formative assessments, which encouraged regular study habits among individuals. It can further be exemplified by the responses to Likert item 2, which depicted a high mean value ($M=4.5$), suggesting strong autonomy over L2 learning. Furthermore, one learner has reported, *"I started studying a little every week for the quizzes; if I didn't understand something, I knew I could ask the teacher before the end of term"* during the interview in consistent with the views of SDT, when learners

feel autonomous and competent through frequent feedback. With one participant's remark: "Knowing that every assignment counted, I kept working on English even when I was tired, because I could see myself getting better.", it was further observed that such learners are more likely to invest sustained effort (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Thus, formative assessments seem to foster a mastery-oriented approach, where learners take responsibility for their personal progress and engage in ongoing learning practices. However, according to survey data, not only were formative tasks seen as motivating for learners "to improve language skills" as in item 10, but also summative tasks. Although the mean ($M=3.5$) indicates a moderate level of agreement, only a small number of participants have selected the highest response: "Strongly Agree" category. For instance, the comment, *"I usually only studied right before the final because it's worth so much,"* reflects cramming for summative tests, suggesting that both assessment types spurred effort, but in distinct ways,

and tend to trigger a performance orientation, such as studying only for the grade. Therefore, the study aligns with Harlen and James (1997), who noted that formative assessments primarily influence students' learning strategies and motivation, encouraging continuous effort, whereas summative assessments are retrospective. Overall, the results together suggest that students invested effort more consistently with formative tasks, satisfying competence and autonomy, while summative tasks prompted last-minute exertion geared toward passing the test.

4.2.5. Preference and Perception of Fairness

Overall, learners expressed a clear preference for formative assessments, often citing their fairness and supportiveness. Many interviewees felt that the iterative, personalized feedback process made them feel more equitable. One student explained, *“Quizzes felt fairer to me because if I did badly once, I had other chances to improve. It wasn't all on one test.”* in consistent with fair assessment practices as they foster feelings of being

valued and satisfied (Rasooli, Zandi, & DeLuca, 2019). There was a strong agreement towards summative assessments, which some learners saw as an objective measure, yet others noted that this all-or-nothing nature could be stressful. For instance, many remarked, *“At least with a final, everyone answers the same questions, so it’s clear. But it’s unfair if one bad day ruins our whole grade”*. Many felt that formative assessments were more transparent and less punitive, aligning with SDT’s relatedness needs by building peer collaboration, indicated in item 12, and teacher support, indicated in item 11 (M=4.6), reflecting how they fulfill the SDT need for relatedness through emotional support, fostering a sense of connection. Summatives, in contrast, were often associated with competition as in item 15 (M=3.2) and isolation as in item 14 (M=3.1), which undermine community engagement and collaborative interaction, leaving learners feeling isolated and unsupported. Despite favoring formative methods for motivation, learners acknowledged the role of summative assessments, which provide a

necessary benchmark of achievement. For example, one noted, *“I prefer continuous feedback, but I also see why a final exam is needed. It shows what I’ve really learned”*. This balanced perspective aligns with SDT’s view of competence, where formative assessments build self-efficacy over time, while summative assessments provide external validation, aligning with literature that suggests summatives document learning outcomes even as formatives support ongoing language growth (Ismail, Rahul, Patra & Rezvani, 2022). However, the majority felt that one-shot examinations undermine autonomy, with no room for choice and competence (outcome beyond control).

Thus, both quantitative preferences and qualitative comments perceived the formative approach as more equitable and need-supportive, where undergraduates favored and viewed it as fairer; a perception that further bolstered their motivation, aligning with SDT.

4.3. Analysis and Discussion Related to the Second Research Question

“In what ways do the effects of formative/summative assessments on motivation relate to the components proposed by the Self-Determination Theory and its three components?”

The above results revealed that formative assessments significantly outperform summative assessments in supporting the three core psychological needs posited by SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000), thereby enhancing learners’ intrinsic motivation in the ESL classroom. This will be extensively discussed in the following section.

4.3.1. Autonomy: Choice, Control Over Learning, and Decision- Making

According to Deci and Ryan (2000), autonomy refers to learners' ability to make meaningful choices in their learning. During the analysis, formative assessments were consistently perceived as autonomy-supportive. Namely, the questionnaire items on autonomy showed a consistently higher mean score for formative assessments ($M=4.4$) compared to summative assessments ($M=3.15$). This substantial difference suggests that learners perceive formative assessments as autonomous. Similarly, when analyzing the qualitative comments about being able to pace their learning, receive continuous feedback, and engage in real-world tasks, learners reported that activities such as peer discussions, regular quizzes, feedback-integrated assignments, and presentations gave them "space to express and explore" their ideas, allowing themselves to make meaningful choices while encouraging a sense of

ownership, which is in consistent with Reeve (2006), who argues that autonomy-supportive teaching fosters internalization of learning goals and deeper engagement. In contrast, summative assessments were identified as “rigid” or “fixed” and “externally imposed”, thereby reducing their sense of control and triggering compliance-driven behaviours and test anxiety, perceiving as controlling environments that generate fewer motivation (Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Sheldon, & Deci, 2004), which is less sustainable, disengaging, and autonomy-thwarting.

4.3.2. Competence: Building Confidence Through Feedback and Mastery

Competence, as Deci and Ryan (2000) assert, is the need to feel effective and capable of achieving desired outcomes. Reinforcing earlier observations, the questionnaire responses for formative assessments scored higher ($M=4.4$), compared to summative assessments ($M=3.5$), due to their ability

to build learners' sense of competence. A compelling support for this inference was received where most learners highlighted how iterative feedback and the opportunity to improve made them "realize progress", identify weaknesses, and improve gradually, leading to higher self-efficacy. Those comments mirror the idea that formative feedback enhances learners' perceived competence, particularly when it is specific, timely, and actionable (Black & Wiliam, 2009). Moreover, the results have validated that the formative tasks completed by learners during the two semesters have often provided scaffolding as a key instructional feature for promoting mastery experiences (Bandura, 1997). In contrast, summative assessments were perceived as "judgmental" and "final", with little scope for learning through error correction. As competence thrives on experiences of mastery and perceived improvement (Deci & Ryan, 2000), the static nature of summative assessments appears insufficient for nurturing this psychological need.

4.3.3. Relatedness: Social Connections and Emotional Safety in Learning

The need for relatedness refers to feeling respected, understood, and connected to others (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Again, formative assessments scored more favorably ($M=4.5$) than summative assessments ($M=3.1$) in this dimension, as such tasks involved ongoing interaction with teachers and peers, strengthening “relatedness”. Learners highlighted how teacher feedback, praise, and peer collaboration made them feel supported and connected. The interviews underscored this pattern where participants described classroom discussions, peer assessments, and instructor feedback as enhancing a sense of “belonging” and inside the classroom, which resonate with Skinner and Belmont (1993) since relatedness enhances learners’ emotional engagement when teachers are perceived as responsive, and Davis (2003) where such teacher-student relationships grounded in warmth and trust enhance motivation and sense of classroom safety. Formative

assessments foster these perceptions, creating interactive and emotionally supportive environments (Wentzel, 1997). Conversely, summative evaluations were seen as isolating, stressful, and anxiety-inducing, lacking emotional interaction, interpersonal connection, and instructional support. In collectivist cultures like Sri Lanka, where social harmony and group identity are emphasized and relational dynamics influence learning motivation (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), feelings of disconnection during summative evaluations are particularly detrimental to motivation in L2 learning.

Therefore, the analysis reveals that learners overwhelmingly perceive formative assessments as more motivating than summative assessments.

4.4. Analysis and Discussion Related to the Third Research Question

“Which type of assessment (either formative or summative) do students report as more effective in

enhancing their motivation to learn English, and why?”

Based on the integrated analysis, learners reported formative assessments as more effective than summative assessments in enhancing their motivation to learn English. This preference is attributed to formative assessments' alignment with SDT, particularly in supporting autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and its shared characteristics: assessment-driven engagement, recognition of progress, intrinsic vs. extrinsic drive, alongside personal preferences and different learning styles. Learners valued frequent feedback, opportunities to track progress, and the emotionally supportive teacher involvement in formative tasks that promoted intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement, unlike summative assessments, which were often seen as grade-oriented. Although a few students preferred summative assessments due to personal learning styles, the majority favored formative assessments for their transparency, low-

stakes nature, and capacity to encourage continuous improvement.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study's findings provide compelling evidence that formative assessments play a more facilitative role than summative assessments in supporting the motivational needs of Sri Lankan ESL undergraduates, aligning closely with SDT principles. Specifically, formative assessments were found to enhance learner autonomy by offering greater control, choice, and personal engagement in the learning process through ongoing, interactive tasks. They also nurtured a stronger sense of competence, as evidenced by the value placed on timely, constructive feedback that enabled learners to identify gaps and progressively build mastery in English. Furthermore, the emotional and social support embedded in formative practices fostered a sense of relatedness, wherein students felt more connected to their teachers and peers, reinforcing a safe and collaborative learning environment. In

contrast, summative assessments were identified as restrictive and disconnected from learners' psychological needs, which impeded their intrinsic motivation. Thus, it underscores the need for a more formative-oriented assessment culture that would better address the learners' core motivational needs, ultimately leading to deeper language acquisition. In sum, the quantitative trends (higher means, lower SDs for formative items) and learners' testimonies converge: autonomy-supportive, competence-building practices boosted learners' intrinsic drive.

While formative assessments enhance motivation, summative assessments continue to serve a vital function in certifying achievement and gauging overall performance, indicating the importance of a balanced approach. In line with this, the study recommends a formative-weighted assessment design, thereby scaffolding major examinations with frequent low-stakes formative tasks for score distribution. Embedding maximized feedback opportunities and choice into the curriculum, while

maintaining clear summative targets, will satisfy SDT needs and maintain high motivation in practice.

5.1. Synthesis and Implications

As the findings indicate, formative assessments more robustly support higher-quality motivation, while summative assessments play a role in credentialing and accountability, their design and application often fall short of addressing the motivational dimensions.

Since optimal motivation arises when all SDT needs are met simultaneously (Niemic & Ryan, 2009), a strategic implication based on this premise is to recalibrate assessment design to achieve a more formative-weighted balance. For instance, a 50:50 or 60:40 ratio in favor of formative components does not negate the value of final examinations but rather repositions them as one part of a broader, more supportive assessment framework. Ultimately, a predominantly formative assessment design, complemented by summative evaluation, appears best suited to satisfying the three basic psychological

needs posited by SDT: autonomy, competence, and relatedness in Sri Lankan ESL classrooms, fostering meaningful engagement and sustained learner motivation.

List of Abbreviations

L2 : second language

ESL : English as a Second Language

SDT : Self-Determination Theory

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