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Strategic Approaches to Student Involvement in Formative Assessment: Insights From Qualitative Interviews

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the strategic approaches employed by educators to meaningfully involve students in formative assessment within the school system of Tehran, Iran. A qualitative research design was adopted, utilizing semi-structured interviews with 24 educators from various public and private schools in Tehran. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their active engagement in assessment practices. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically using NVivo software. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-step framework, with open codes developed inductively and refined into broader subthemes and main themes. Analysis revealed three overarching themes: pedagogical strategies for engagement, psychological enablers of participation, and institutional and cultural influences. Within these, teachers reported using student-centered goal setting, peer assessment, dialogic teaching, and digital tools to increase student participation. Emotional safety, trust, and a growth-oriented mindset were identified as psychological preconditions for involvement. Additionally, the implementation of formative practices was influenced by school culture, leadership support, curricular flexibility, and parental expectations. Teachers who had access to professional development and institutional support demonstrated greater innovation in engaging students. Despite systemic barriers, educators employed context-sensitive strategies to foster student agency and ownership in assessment. The study highlights that effective student involvement in formative assessment is a multifaceted process requiring intentional pedagogy, emotional support, and enabling institutional environments. Findings suggest the need for professional learning, leadership backing, and cultural alignment to enhance participatory assessment practices. The research offers practical implications for teacher training, curriculum design, and school policy aimed at promoting formative assessment cultures.

Keywords: formative assessment; student involvement; qualitative research; assessment strategies; teacher perspectives; educational innovation; Tehran schools.

Introduction

In recent decades, there has been a paradigm shift in educational assessment, moving from summative, teacher-centered evaluation models to more formative, participatory approaches that emphasize student involvement and learning progress (Black & Wiliam, 2009). Formative assessment, defined as the collection and use of assessment information during learning to adjust teaching and support students' learning needs, is increasingly seen as central to high-quality pedagogy (Heritage, 2010). Within this evolving landscape, student involvement in formative assessment has garnered substantial attention for its potential to foster self-regulation, deepen engagement, and improve learning outcomes (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006;

Andrade, 2019). Despite this growing recognition, practical strategies to meaningfully involve students in formative assessment—especially in diverse sociocultural contexts—remain unevenly explored and implemented.

The theoretical foundations of student involvement in assessment are grounded in constructivist and sociocultural theories of learning. From a constructivist standpoint, learners actively construct meaning based on their experiences, and formative assessment can serve as a scaffolding tool that guides learners toward higher levels of understanding (Sadler, 1989). Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory further emphasizes the role of social interaction and mediated learning, suggesting that formative assessment, when implemented through dialogic and collaborative means, enhances the learner's movement through the zone of proximal development (ZPD). These frameworks underline the importance of learner agency and participation in assessment processes—not merely as passive recipients of feedback, but as active constructors of knowledge.

Student involvement in formative assessment typically takes various forms, such as self-assessment, peer assessment, goal setting, and the co-construction of success criteria (Harris et al., 2015). These strategies aim to engage students cognitively, metacognitively, and affectively in their own learning process. Self-assessment, for instance, enhances students' ability to monitor their performance and identify areas for improvement, thereby promoting self-regulation and autonomy (Panadero et al., 2016). Peer assessment fosters collaboration and deepens understanding through mutual critique, while goal setting and success criteria clarification align learning efforts with instructional intentions (Clark, 2012). However, these strategies require a shift not only in classroom practices but also in broader school cultures and power relations between teachers and students.

Despite the well-documented benefits of student involvement in formative assessment, implementation challenges persist. Research has shown that many teachers lack the pedagogical skills or institutional support necessary to engage students meaningfully in assessment (Brown & Harris, 2014). Furthermore, cultural attitudes toward authority, achievement, and assessment often shape how student involvement is perceived and enacted. For example, in contexts where summative assessment dominates, students and parents may undervalue formative processes, viewing them as secondary or informal (Carless, 2011). Teachers, too, may feel constrained by rigid curricula, time pressures, and accountability demands, all of which can limit the scope for formative practices (Bennett, 2011). Consequently, understanding how teachers navigate these challenges and what strategies they use to promote student involvement becomes essential for designing supportive policies and professional development programs.

Student involvement in formative assessment is also intertwined with affective and psychological dimensions of learning. Studies indicate that such involvement can enhance motivation, self-efficacy, and a sense of ownership over the learning process (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Andrade & Brookhart, 2020). However, these benefits are contingent upon creating emotionally safe environments where students feel supported rather than judged. Research by Boud and Molloy (2013) emphasizes that feedback, a central component of formative assessment, is most effective when it fosters trust and builds learner identity rather than merely correcting errors. Thus, strategic approaches to student involvement must consider not only cognitive structures but also the emotional and relational dynamics within the classroom.

Technology has further transformed the landscape of formative assessment by providing new tools for student engagement. Digital platforms enable real-time feedback, interactive tasks, and self-monitoring features that empower students to track their learning progress (Pachler et al., 2010). For example, formative tools like Google Classroom, Socrative, and Padlet are increasingly used to facilitate peer review, generate feedback, and visualize achievement data. However, the integration of technology also raises questions about digital equity, teacher readiness, and the pedagogical purpose of technological tools (Williamson & Piattoeva, 2022). Understanding how educators strategically use technology to involve students in formative processes can offer valuable insights into 21st-century assessment practices.

Empirical studies have begun to document the various ways in which teachers incorporate student involvement in formative assessment across different educational levels and contexts. For instance, Cowie and Bell (1999) found that formative assessment interactions in science classrooms were more productive when teachers intentionally involved students in dialogues about their thinking. Similarly, Wiliam and Thompson (2007) highlighted the importance of engineering effective classroom discussions and activities that elicit evidence of learning. More recently, research in multicultural and multilingual settings has shown that student involvement strategies must be adapted to local beliefs, values, and communication norms (Leung, 2014; Swaffield, 2011). These findings suggest that effective practices are not only pedagogical but also cultural and relational.

In the Iranian educational context, which is characterized by centralized curricula, high-stakes examinations, and relatively hierarchical teacher-student relationships, formative assessment remains underutilized compared to traditional summative methods (Pishghadam et al., 2015). Although national reforms have emphasized the importance of "assessment for learning," teachers often struggle with translating these principles into daily practice, particularly in terms of student participation. Cultural factors, institutional constraints, and lack of professional training create barriers to the widespread adoption of student-involved formative practices. As such, there is a pressing need to explore how teachers in Iran and similar educational systems strategically promote student involvement in formative assessment and navigate the associated challenges.

Given this background, the current study seeks to investigate the strategic approaches adopted by educators to involve students in formative assessment within the Tehran school system. The study aims to identify the pedagogical, psychological, and institutional dimensions that shape these practices, drawing on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with 24 educators. By examining how teachers conceptualize and operationalize student involvement in formative assessment, the research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on effective assessment practices and provides context-sensitive recommendations for policy and professional development. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What strategies do teachers use to involve students in formative assessment?
2. How do teachers perceive the benefits and challenges of student involvement?
3. What institutional and cultural factors influence the implementation of these strategies?

Through its focus on lived experiences and reflective insights, this study offers a grounded understanding of the mechanisms and conditions that facilitate meaningful student participation in assessment. In doing so, it bridges theoretical frameworks with practical application, responding to calls in the literature for more contextually situated investigations of formative assessment in action (Hill, 2013; McMillan, 2013). The findings are expected to inform teacher education programs, school leadership policies, and classroom practices aimed at enhancing formative assessment through active student engagement.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the strategic approaches adopted by educators to foster student involvement in formative assessment. The interpretive paradigm guided the research, emphasizing the subjective experiences and meanings constructed by educators within their institutional contexts. The focus on in-depth exploration made semi-structured interviews the most appropriate method for capturing the nuanced practices and perspectives related to student involvement.

The study included 24 participants, all of whom were educators actively involved in assessment practices across secondary schools and higher education institutions in Tehran, Iran. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure they had direct experience with formative assessment strategies. The sample included a diverse range of academic disciplines and

teaching levels to capture a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study. Recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was achieved—that is, when no new themes or insights emerged from additional interviews.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted over a three-month period. Each interview lasted between 45 and 70 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face or via secure video conferencing platforms, depending on participant preference and availability. The interview guide was designed to elicit detailed responses about the strategies, beliefs, and institutional contexts related to student involvement in formative assessment. Core topics included: the rationale for involving students, specific strategies used, perceived challenges and benefits, and institutional supports or constraints.

Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. All participants were assured of confidentiality, and pseudonyms were assigned during transcription to protect identities. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant university ethics committee, and informed consent was gathered from all participants prior to data collection.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the interview data, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach. This involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. NVivo software (version 12) was used to manage and code the data systematically.

Open coding was first conducted to identify meaningful units of data related to student involvement in formative assessment. These codes were then grouped into broader categories and themes through an iterative and inductive process. Themes were refined through multiple rounds of analysis and team discussions to ensure credibility and depth. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the process by the primary researcher, who documented analytic decisions and reflected on potential biases through a research journal.

Trustworthiness of the findings was enhanced through techniques such as member checking, peer debriefing, and maintaining an audit trail. These strategies ensured the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the results.

Findings and Results

Theme 1: Pedagogical Strategies for Engagement

Student-Centered Goal Setting:

Participants emphasized the importance of involving students in setting their own learning objectives as a strategy to increase engagement. Teachers reported using goal-setting activities at the beginning of lessons or units to align expectations. One participant noted, "When students help define what success looks like, they feel more responsible for reaching it." Concepts such as co-construction of goals, contextual relevance, and personalized benchmarks emerged repeatedly as essential strategies.

Scaffolding and Feedback Loops:

Educators described the use of formative checkpoints and iterative feedback as key mechanisms for guiding student growth. Scaffolding was implemented through small, manageable tasks with built-in feedback cycles. A teacher reflected, "I break complex tasks into parts and give feedback at each stage—it helps them correct before it's too late." This included verbal feedback, feedforward strategies, and student self-monitoring as recurrent practices.

Peer Involvement Techniques:

Many participants highlighted the benefits of involving students in peer feedback and collaborative evaluation. Strategies ranged from structured peer assessments to paired review sessions. One participant stated, “They often listen more carefully to feedback from their peers than from me—it’s more relatable.” Teachers also emphasized training students in peer review to ensure constructive and respectful exchanges.

Use of Reflective Tools:

Reflective practices such as journals, checklists, and audio/video logs were widely used to encourage student metacognition. Teachers found that regular reflection allowed students to monitor their own learning and adjust their strategies accordingly. One participant shared, “I ask them to write weekly reflections. They often realize things about their learning they hadn’t noticed before.”

Integrating Technology in Formative Tasks:

Digital tools were frequently integrated to facilitate student involvement. Platforms like Google Forms, Padlet, or Edmodo were used for real-time formative checks and interactive assessments. A participant explained, “When we use technology, students feel more involved—it gives them instant feedback and keeps them motivated.” Teachers emphasized that technology was most effective when combined with purposeful pedagogical goals.

Dialogic Teaching Practices:

Several participants underscored the importance of dialogic interactions during assessment. Open discussions, guided questioning, and student-led explanations were employed to deepen understanding and reveal student thinking. A respondent shared, “When students explain their thinking out loud, it helps both them and me see where they’re stuck.” Dialogic assessment was perceived as both a formative tool and an instructional strategy.

Theme 2: Psychological Enablers of Participation

Building Trust and Safety:

Teachers emphasized that students must feel emotionally safe to participate meaningfully in formative assessment. Establishing a non-judgmental environment and showing empathy were viewed as foundational. One participant remarked, “Unless they trust that mistakes are okay, they won’t open up in assessments.” Emotional safety fostered greater honesty and self-reflection.

Enhancing Student Agency:

Educators reported that giving students choices in assessment formats or criteria led to higher engagement and responsibility. Autonomy was encouraged through co-designing rubrics or allowing flexible formats for responses. “Letting them choose how to show what they’ve learned makes them care more,” said one participant, highlighting the role of agency in shaping meaningful involvement.

Motivation through Purposeful Feedback:

Participants consistently linked the tone and content of feedback to student motivation. Effective feedback was described as specific, encouraging, and forward-looking. A teacher noted, “Instead of just pointing out errors, I highlight what’s working and what can be improved—this motivates them.” Feedback that acknowledged effort and growth was seen as crucial.

Emotional Support Structures:

Teachers often used emotional check-ins, validation, and encouragement to reduce performance anxiety and foster a positive assessment experience. Some described creating rituals before assessments to ease stress. One participant explained, “We start with a short group conversation, just to bring down the stress before we begin.” These practices enhanced emotional readiness for assessment.

Growth-Oriented Assessment Mindsets:

Many educators actively worked to shift students' mindsets from performance orientation to growth orientation. They emphasized progress over perfection and normalized struggle as part of learning. A respondent shared, "I always say, 'It's okay not to get it yet.' That one word—'yet'—makes a huge difference." This mindset encouraged persistence and self-efficacy.

Theme 3: Institutional and Cultural Influences

Assessment Culture of the School:

Educators described varying levels of institutional support for formative assessment. In some schools, a culture of summative dominance limited student involvement, while others embraced innovative approaches. A teacher noted, "Our school still sees exams as the real thing—formative work is often overlooked." The prevailing culture influenced both student perceptions and teacher practices.

Professional Development Support:

Participants identified targeted training and peer collaboration as enablers for effectively involving students in assessment. Shared learning through workshops, learning communities, or mentoring was highlighted as valuable. One participant emphasized, "It was through a peer mentoring group that I learned how to make assessment more participatory." Ongoing support helped translate theory into practice.

Curriculum Flexibility and Constraints:

The degree of curricular rigidity significantly impacted the feasibility of formative approaches. Some educators felt constrained by tight pacing guides and high-stakes testing demands. "There's just no time," one teacher stated. Others, however, reported having autonomy to embed formative cycles, particularly when leadership supported flexible pacing.

Leadership Encouragement:

Strong support from school leadership was identified as a driver of assessment innovation. Principals who encouraged experimentation and protected time for planning were seen as instrumental. One respondent remarked, "My principal told me to go ahead and try something new—it gave me confidence." Leadership support empowered teachers to take pedagogical risks.

Parent and Community Expectations:

Cultural expectations and parental attitudes toward grades influenced how student involvement in assessment was received. Teachers reported having to educate parents about the value of formative practices. "Some parents only care about test scores, so I have to explain how this helps in the long run," a participant shared. Navigating these expectations was a continual process.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to explore the strategic approaches employed by educators in Tehran to involve students in formative assessment. Through thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 24 teachers, three overarching themes emerged: (1) pedagogical strategies for engagement, (2) psychological enablers of participation, and (3) institutional and cultural influences. These findings offer valuable insight into the practical, emotional, and systemic considerations that shape how formative assessment is enacted in real-world classrooms.

One of the key findings of this study was the variety and intentionality of pedagogical strategies used to engage students in formative assessment. Teachers consistently emphasized student-centered goal setting, scaffolding, reflective tools, and peer involvement as essential techniques. These practices align with prior research emphasizing that formative assessment is most effective when students are active participants rather than passive recipients (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Specifically, the finding that teachers used co-constructed learning goals and success criteria mirrors Clark's (2012) observation that transparent expectations promote student agency and accountability. Additionally, the use of feedback loops and iterative tasks

echoes Black and Wiliam's (2009) assertion that effective formative assessment involves "engineering productive classroom discussions and activities" to elicit evidence of learning. The integration of digital tools to support these practices is also consistent with contemporary studies highlighting the role of technology in facilitating real-time feedback and learner autonomy (Pachler et al., 2010).

The emphasis on dialogic teaching and reflective practices in the findings further supports the argument that formative assessment should be deeply intertwined with instruction. The use of guided discussions, reflective journals, and student explanations reflects what Wiliam and Thompson (2007) refer to as "activating students as owners of their own learning." Notably, participants in this study used dialogic interactions not merely as assessment tools but as formative moments that allowed students to verbalize their thought processes and receive targeted feedback. This reinforces the perspective of Cowie and Bell (1999), who found that formative assessment is most effective when it is embedded in spontaneous classroom interactions that make student thinking visible.

The second major theme highlighted the psychological conditions necessary for meaningful student involvement in assessment, including emotional safety, motivation, and a growth-oriented mindset. Teachers underscored the importance of building trust, validating student effort, and emphasizing progress over performance. These findings strongly align with Hattie and Timperley's (2007) feedback model, which emphasizes that feedback should not only address "Where am I going?" and "How am I going?" but also "Where to next?"—guiding students forward in a supportive manner. Similarly, Boud and Molloy (2013) argue that effective feedback must foster trust and identity formation, rather than serving a purely corrective function. The data from this study confirm that emotional and relational dimensions are not peripheral but central to formative assessment.

The study also found that promoting student agency through assessment choice and autonomy-supportive practices led to higher levels of engagement and ownership. These results support the work of Andrade (2019), who emphasized that self-assessment, when taught and scaffolded appropriately, enhances metacognitive awareness and learner independence. Furthermore, the use of emotional support structures and normalization of struggle resonate with the idea that learning is both a cognitive and emotional journey. As one teacher in the study said, *"I always say, 'It's okay not to get it yet.' That one word—'yet'—makes a huge difference."* This quote reflects the kind of mindset that Dweck (2006) has linked to persistence, resilience, and academic success in formative contexts.

The third theme, institutional and cultural influences, sheds light on how school environments and sociocultural norms shape the implementation of formative practices. Teachers in this study reported being affected by school-wide assessment cultures that either supported or limited student involvement. In some schools, summative exams were prioritized, limiting opportunities for formative dialogue. This aligns with Carless's (2011) analysis of Confucian-heritage settings, where hierarchical teacher-student relationships and high-stakes testing reduce the perceived legitimacy of formative assessment. Similarly, Bennett (2011) argues that systemic constraints, including time pressures, curriculum overload, and lack of alignment between formative and summative purposes, can undermine the enactment of formative assessment ideals.

Professional development support was identified as a key enabling factor. Participants who received targeted training or engaged in peer learning communities were more confident and innovative in implementing student-centered assessment practices. These findings are consistent with Hill (2013), who emphasizes the role of ongoing professional learning in enhancing teachers' assessment literacy. Additionally, the study found that school leadership played a pivotal role in either encouraging or discouraging experimentation with formative methods. Supportive leadership, especially when paired with curricular flexibility, enabled teachers to embed formative cycles within their daily routines. This aligns with research by Heritage (2010), who highlights the need for school-wide capacity-building to sustain effective formative assessment.

Finally, the influence of parents and the broader community emerged as a salient subtheme. Teachers noted that some parents equated assessment strictly with grades and exams, creating tension when formative practices were introduced. This confirms prior research by Swaffield (2011), which suggests that a lack of shared understanding about assessment purposes can create barriers to student involvement. The findings underscore the importance of engaging all stakeholders in conversations about the value of formative assessment, especially in culturally conservative or exam-driven environments.

In summary, the findings of this study affirm that student involvement in formative assessment is a multidimensional process shaped by pedagogical intent, psychological safety, and institutional culture. While teachers in Tehran are developing creative and context-sensitive strategies, their efforts are moderated by systemic pressures and cultural expectations. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of how student involvement can be fostered through strategic design, emotional attunement, and organizational support.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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