ISSN E: 3006-1466
ISSN P: 3006-1458
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.03 No.04 (2025)

OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS IN ESL ASSESSMENT PRACTICES AT SECONDARY LEVEL

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Abstract

Assessment plays a pivotal role in English language education by measuring learners' progress and informing instructional decisions. This study aimed to identify the opportunities and threats in assessment practices of English as a Second Language (ESL) at the secondary level in Punjab, Pakistan. A quantitative descriptive survey design was employed, using a structured questionnaire to identify opportunities and threats in assessment practices. The population comprised all public secondary school English teachers in Punjab, Pakistan. A stratified random sampling technique was used to select 301 (187 male and 114 female) secondary school English teachers. Data were analyzed through frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations, t-tests, and one-way ANOVA. The results revealed several opportunities including online assessment platforms, speech recognition software, grammar checking tools, portfolio-based assessment, and rubric-based evaluation. However, significant threats were also identified including lack of emphasis on listening and speaking in board examinations, absence of standardized assessment tools, limited technological resources, inadequate teacher assessment literacy, heavy workloads, and parental pressure for high marks leading to traditional testing methods. The findings suggest that strategic reforms in teacher training, assessment literacy development, and examination system revision are essential to enhance ESL assessment practices.

Keywords: English as a Second Language, Assessment Practices, Opportunities, Threats, Secondary Level

1. Introduction

Assessment is the process of gathering, measuring, and analyzing information on a person's knowledge, skills, abilities, or performance to make decisions about learning, progress, or achievement. Language assessment is an organized process of measuring language proficiency of learners using standardized tests and structured observation to determine language knowledge and skills. It is an integral part of the English language teaching and learning process as it allows relevant and timely feedback, tracking students' learning progress, and offering the teacher flexibility in teaching (Winna & Sabarun, 2023).

Assessment plays a key role in education by identifying students' strengths and weaknesses in their learning process. It helps teachers provide extra academic support to students who need it. Xu and Brown (2016) highlighted that assessment guides teachers in making decisions about students' learning outcomes. Suskie (2018) explained that assessment not only helps students improve academically but also monitors the overall quality of education. Rahman et al. (2021) stated that the teaching process is affected by assessment practices. Assessment practices are influenced by teachers' experiences, intuition, and adherence to traditions rather than formal training (Işık, 2021).

The educational system in Pakistan is predominantly based on written examinations, which compels teachers to dedicate long hours to preparing their students to excel in these tests. This exam-focused approach often results in students being required to write about repetitive and limited topics during assessments. Such a system restricts students' opportunities to develop critical thinking and creativity, as they rarely engage with subjects beyond the prescribed curriculum. In turn, this focus on memorizing weakens the process of acquiring analytical qualities and creativity in solving problems, which are key to holistic education and life-long learning (Akhter & Malik, 2019).

Language assessment typically covers multiple language skills. Developing the four fundamental language skills, speaking, listening, reading, and writing, requires particular

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ISSN E: 3006-1466
ISSN P: 3006-1458
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.03 No.04 (2025)

assessment techniques. Language skills development depends on the appropriateness of assessment (Cho et al., 2020). In Pakistan, studies on the assessment practices in English language have focused mainly on the necessity of formal training. The results have shown that despite the widespread belief that formative assessment is a helpful method, many teachers still adhere to summative methods (Saeed et al., 2018; Shahzad et al., 2022).

In Pakistan, secondary-level assessment practices are dominated by memorization and textbook-based teaching where students are largely taught selective content and other skills such as speaking are neglected. Question papers take the centre stage, with focus on rote learning, but not holistic skills development (Javaid et al., 2023). Rind and Mari (2019) argued that public examinations in Pakistan have long been criticized for placing excessive pressure on students, often compelling them to attend private tuition alongside formal schooling to prepare for exams. This system tends to promote examination-oriented teaching practices rather than fostering deeper learning.

The assessment of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in Pakistani ESL classrooms faces numerous challenges. Listening is a receptive skill and should be assessed in a social context with continuous interaction by using different strategies and tools for reliable and valid results. Unfortunately, in Pakistan, teachers do not use current listening assessment techniques in the classrooms, particularly at secondary level as final board exams for 9th and 10th classes there is no assessment of listening skill in English subject (Shahzad et al., 2022). Similarly, speaking skills are not usually assessed in Pakistani ESL classes. Most commonly, educators rely on unstructured test scores without rubrics, thus leading to a poor assessment of the students (Riaz et al., 2019).

Given these challenges, there is a pressing need to systematically examine the opportunities and threats associated with ESL assessment practices at the secondary level. The present study employs a SWOT framework to identify the external factors (opportunities and threats) that influence the effectiveness of ESL assessment practices.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The purpose of the study was to analyze the opportunities and threats in current ESL assessment practices at the secondary level in Punjab, Pakistan.

1.2 Research Objectives of the Study

- To ascertain the opportunities in assessment practices in English language at secondary level as perceived by teachers.
- To identify the threats in assessment practices in English language at secondary level as perceived by teachers.
- To ascertain the difference between teachers' perspectives on the basis of demographics i.e., gender, locality, academic qualification, and professional qualification.

1.3 Research Questions of the Study

- Which are the opportunities in assessment practices of ESL at secondary level as perceived by teachers?
- What are the threats in assessment practices of ESL at secondary level as perceived by teachers?
- Is there any difference between teachers' perspectives on the basis of demographics i.e., gender, locality, academic qualification, and professional qualification?

2. Literature Review

Assessment in education involves diverse tools and methods to measure, evaluate, and document students' academic progress and skill acquisition. According to Lacy and Williams (2018), assessment in education is defined as the use of various tools and methods by teachers to evaluate and document learners' academic progress and skill acquisition. It helps

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ISSN P: 3006-1458
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.03 No.04 (2025)

identify strengths and weaknesses, guides teaching practices, and ensures learning outcomes align with educational goals, fostering continuous improvement in both teaching and learning.

Assessment acts as a powerful tool and plays a crucial role in education by indicating the extent to which educational objectives and goals are being met. Assessment serves as a bridge connecting teachers, their instructional methods, and students' learning (Ghaicha, 2016). Moreover, it improves learning by providing feedback. Through this feedback, assessment fosters meaningful interactions between students and teachers, as well as among students themselves. These interactions help learners recognize their strengths and weaknesses and enable them to adopt new learning strategies or refine existing ones (Islam, 2019).

Soodmand et al. (2018) pointed out that the knowledge of alternative assessment methods, academic qualifications, and teaching experience determine the assessment practices of teachers. Educators who know various forms of assessment, including portfolios and presentations, would be more apt to employ them in their practice rather than depending on traditional tests only. Moreover, individuals who have a higher academic level and education-specific training have a higher level of assessment skills.

In Pakistan, classroom-based assessment practices are not very common in public schools. Huma and Akhtar (2021) noted that formative assessment approaches are extensively used by private schools and that they monitor the progress of students throughout the learning process and give constructive feedback to improve knowledge. Comparatively, summative assessment, which includes final tests and standardized tests, is used extensively in the public schools and evaluates the performance of a student at the end of a learning session. This difference demonstrates that, in contrast to the public schools, the private ones are more concerned with the process of constant learning and self-development.

According to Mahroof and Saeed (2021), question papers which are administered by BISEs (Boards of Intermediate and Secondary Education) are designed principally to test low-level abilities, such as memorizing and discerning. They are less concerned with evaluation of higher-order skills, including the ability to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information. According to Irfan (2018), examinations require assessments that usually focus on easy and conventional questions.

The assessment of listening refers to the process of assessing an individual's ability to comprehend, interpret, and respond to spoken language. It involves using tools like listening tests, audio recordings, or conversations to see how well they understand words, sentences, or ideas, and how accurately they can respond or explain what they heard. Effective listening assessment considers factors like comprehension, interpretation, accuracy, and the ability to infer meaning from auditory input (Bachman & Palmer, 2010).

Patwary and Rumman (2023) found that secondary English teachers lack effective listening strategies, and the curriculum offers limited guidance. They recommended well-equipped language labs and continuous assessment, but most teachers are not yet prepared to implement them. Kakar and Kaukab (2023) analyzed the design of the Pakistan English Language Curriculum (2006) and came up with some pitfalls. The study revealed that listening and speaking skills are not given much attention in the curriculum; summative assessment is more emphasized than formative assessment; and the lower order cognitive skills on Bloom's Taxonomy are emphasized.

The evaluation of speaking skills is a complicated task and considers various methods, rubrics, and standards internationally (Galaczi et al., 2011). The study by Abbasi et al. (2023) emphasized that teacher knowledge, language proficiency, self-designed rubrics, and on-the-fly assessment events are the major factors used to assess speaking skills at the undergraduate level. Consequently, Yasmeen et al. (2023) have indicated that during

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CJSSR
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Vol.03 No.04 (2025)

evaluation of speaking skills and communicative competence in general, presentations, discussions, debates, interviews, and reading aloud are widely used by teachers.

Reading skills assessment entails organized procedures to ensure that learners comprehend and engage with written materials in a good manner. It evaluates such significant domains as comprehension (understanding of ideas and themes), fluency (accuracy and speed, as well as textual expression), critical thinking (analytics and assessment of information), and vocabulary development (textual understanding of words). Various instruments are employed, such as standardized tests, formative assessment, such as quizzes and discussions, performance task, such as summarization, observation, and technology-based assessment (Thomas & Verghis, 2018).

The measurement of writing skills in English as a Second Language (ESL) is aimed at measuring the capacity of the learners to convey their ideas in written forms clearly and effectively. Some of the main elements that are assessed during a writing process are grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, organization, coherence, and content relevance. These aspects are usually systematically assessed with the help of rubrics or scoring guides used by teachers. Essay writing, summarization tasks, descriptive or narrative writing, peer review, and portfolio assessment are common evaluation approaches to writing (Beck et al., 2018).

In Pakistan, secondary-level classrooms rely heavily on exams. Teachers often do not assess students' writing based on the curriculum, as the main goal is to pass exams. The exam system emphasizes memorization and high scores rather than evaluating students' actual learning or writing skills. It focuses more on rote learning than on achieving the curriculum's learning goals (Ali, 2011). The English curriculum for grades 9 and 10 was introduced in 2012 and 2013, including suggested evaluation methods. However, traditional assessment methods still dominate, focusing on recall skills instead of encouraging creative writing.

Hidri et al. (2024) investigated the perceptions of 735 ELT teachers about assessment in Pakistan and the alignment of these perceptions with the national language policies. The results indicated high levels of responsibility beliefs both for the students and for the school, but also gaps between teachers' assessment beliefs and their practices. The study made a number of policy recommendations, professional development suggestions, and assessment system improvements to close these gaps and improve education outcomes.

Ashraf and Zaki (2019) revealed that language educators in Pakistan encounter numerous difficulties in language assessment that include poor assessment literacy, big classes, and poor language skills of students. These difficulties result in limited assessment practices which center much on reading and writing skills and ignore the listening and speaking skills. There is also a misalignment between the assessment practices and both the curriculum and the teaching practices which results in the lack of connection between teaching and assessment.

Zaidi et al. (2024) assessed the usefulness of an English grammar test application in enhancing the grammar proficiency of secondary students. The researchers used a mixed-method design and analyzed both pre-tests, post-tests, and questionnaire data through both the tools of statistics and qualitative methods. The results showed that regardless of such limitations as poor internet access and socio-economic barriers, the app has positively affected the study of students and both students and teachers were positive about using the app.

Javaid et al. (2023) investigated the impact of assessment practices on teaching content at the secondary level in Pakistan. The study revealed that current assessment methods prioritize rote learning and textbook content, discouraging speaking skills and promoting selective preparation for exams. These practices influence pedagogical

ISSN E: 3006-1466
ISSN P: 3006-1458
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.03 No.04 (2025)

approaches, limiting comprehensive student learning. The research highlights the need for assessment reforms to support holistic education.

Despite the availability of various assessment opportunities globally, many instructors encounter significant obstacles that limit their ability to fully utilize these opportunities. Such obstacles include insufficient resources, insufficient training, social cultural barriers, and institutional constraints, which in combination with each other act as obstacles to the successful execution of innovative assessment strategies. There is a pressing need for systematic investigation of the opportunities and threats in ESL assessment practices in the Pakistani context.

3. Research Methodology

This study employed a quantitative descriptive survey design to investigate the opportunities and threats in assessment practices of English as a Second Language (ESL) at the secondary level. Creswell (2014) stated that quantitative descriptive research allows for a detailed understanding of trends and patterns by utilizing numerical data that can be statistically analyzed. The chosen survey technique guarantees thorough understanding of the assessment practices of ESL teachers in Punjab, Pakistan by allowing a wide and methodical gathering of data from a sizable population.

For this study, all public secondary school English teachers working under the School Education Department in Punjab, Pakistan constituted the target population. A stratified random sampling technique was applied to ensure that the sample represented variations across gender and geographical locations. In the first stage, the province of Punjab was divided into 3 strata i.e., Southern Punjab, Central Punjab, and North Punjab and then selected 3 schools from Southern Punjab, 3 from North Punjab, and 4 from Central Punjab. The sample consisted of 301 secondary school English teachers, including 187 male teachers and 114 female teachers. This sample size was considered appropriate to provide reliable and generalizable findings.

In this study, a structured questionnaire was used to collect the data. The questionnaire was reviewed by experts in educational research to ensure content validity. A pilot study was conducted with separately 40 (Twenty Male and Twenty Female) participants to test the reliability of the instruments which were not included in the data analysis. Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient 0.79 was calculated to ensure the consistency of the survey items. In this study, the collected data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were used to summarize the data, while inferential statistics such as t-tests and one-way ANOVA were used to investigate the significant differences in responses based on gender and experience levels.

4. Results

4.1 Demographic Details of Sample Participants

Table 1. *Demographic Detail of the Sample Participants (N=301)*

Demographic Variables	Categories	Frequency	%age
Gender	Male	187	62.1
	Female	114	37.8
Locality	Urban	194	64.5
	Rural	107	35.5
Academic Qualification	BS	5	1.7
	MA/MSc	191	63.5
	MS/MPhil	98	32.6
	PhD	7	2.3
Professional Qualification	B.Ed	144	47.8
	M.Ed	123	40.9
	MA/MS Education	34	11.3

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ISSN P: 3006-1458
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.03 No.04 (2025)

Table 1 presents the demographic information of the sample participants. The data indicates that 62.1% of the participants were male, while 37.8% were female. Additionally, 64.5% were from urban and 35.5% were from rural areas. In terms of academic qualifications, 1.7% of the sample teachers classified their academic qualifications as BS, 63.5% as MA/MSc, 32.6% as M.Phil, and 2.3% as PhD. The participants classified their professional qualifications as 47.8% B.Ed., 40.9% M.Ed., and 11.3% MA/MS Education.

4.2 Opportunities in Assessment Practices

Table 2 explains the statement-wise mean on opportunities in assessment practices in ESL. The overall mean of statements was 3.90. It shows that secondary school teachers of ESL perceived that online listening tests, video-based assessment, performance-based assessment, speech recognition software, ORF computer-based assessment tools, portfolio-based assessment, online platforms, and rubric-based assessment can significantly enhance ESL assessment practices.

Table 2. *Statement Wise Analysis of Teachers Regarding Opportunities in Assessment Practices (N=301)*

Sr#	Statements	Mean	SD
1	Online listening tests can be used for accurate and reliable assessment.	3.82	0.97
2	Listening skills can be assessed through MCQs-based tests following listening activities.	3.81	0.96
3	Video-based assessment tasks can be used to assess listening comprehension.	3.72	0.98
4	Oral presentations can be employed in assessing the speaking skills.	3.88	0.93
5	Performance-based assessment can be used to assess the speaking skills.	3.84	0.92
6	Speech recognition software can be used for assessment of pronunciation and fluency.	3.87	1.24
7	Reading comprehension assessment strategy can be used to assess reading comprehension.	3.71	1.23
8	Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) computer-based assessment tool can be used to check correctly read words per minute.	4.21	1.09
9	Portfolio-based assessment offers opportunities to assess students' writing growth.	4.30	1.00
10	Online platforms provide opportunities for more accurate writing assessment.	3.84	1.31
11	Rubric-based assessment can be employed for effective writing skills assessment.	3.93	1.30
Overall		**3.90**	**1.08**

4.3 Threats in Assessment Practices

Table 3 explains the statement-wise mean and standard deviation of the responses of participants on "Threats in Assessment Practices in ESL." The overall mean of statements was 4.00. It shows that secondary school teachers of ESL faced significant threats in assessment practices including the neglect of listening and speaking skills in board examinations, lack of standardized tools, limited access to technological resources, inadequate assessment literacy, heavy workloads, parental pressure for high marks, and bias in assessing written content.

ISSN E: 3006-1466
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CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.03 No.04 (2025)

Table 3. *Statement Wise Analysis of Teachers Regarding Threats in Assessment Practices (N=301)*

Sr#	Statements	Mean	SD
1	Assessing listening skills are often ignored because they are not assessed in board examinations.	4.17	1.16
2	Lack of standardized tools affects the listening assessment.	4.18	1.14
3	Limited access to audio or digital assessment resources prevents accurate measurement of listening skills.	3.79	1.34
4	Speaking skills are less emphasized as there is no practice for assessing speaking skills in the exams.	4.27	1.01
5	There is lack of technological tools to assess speaking skills in the classrooms.	3.70	1.23
6	Lack of standardized rubrics reduces fairness and reliability of speaking assessments.	4.27	1.01
7	Insufficient assessment literacy of teachers is a barrier to assess reading skills.	4.17	1.16
8	Heavy workload and course completion prevent teachers from conducting detailed and continuous reading assessment.	3.83	1.11
9	Teachers neglect reading assessment due to written board examinations.	3.92	1.05
10	Parental and societal pressure for high marks in exams forces teachers to use traditional tests.	4.50	0.74
11	There is bias in assessing the written content due to subjectivity.	4.51	0.71
12	Achieving high scores by reproducing memorized content hinders students from developing creative writing.	2.76	1.37
Overall		**4.00**	**1.08**

4.4 Difference between Respondents' Perspectives Regarding Opportunities and Threats in Assessment Practices in ESL

Table 4. *Difference between Male and Female Teachers' Opinions*

Variables	Category	N	Mean	SD	df	t	Sig.
Gender	Male	187	3.8426	0.31842	298	0.658	0.479
	Female	113	3.8216	0.32547			

Table 4 illustrates the perspectives of male and female teachers. The average number of male teachers (3.8426) is greater than that of female teachers (3.8216). Nonetheless, the computed significance value of .479 is greater than the established significance value of 0.05, indicating there is no statistically significant disparity in teachers' perspective on the basis of gender.

Table 5. *Difference between Teachers' Opinions by Locality*

Variables	Category	N	Mean	SD	df	t	Sig.
Locality	Urban	194	3.8503	0.29843	299	0.592	0.868
	Rural	107	3.8375	0.29802			

Table 5 illustrates the variance in teachers' perspective by locality. The computed significance value of .868 exceeds the specified significance level of 0.05. This signifies that there is no statistically significant disparity in teachers' perspective on the basis of locality i.e., urban and rural.

Table 6 demonstrates the variation in teachers' viewpoints according to their academic credentials. The computed significance value of .636 exceeds the specified significance level

ISSN E: 3006-1466
ISSN P: 3006-1458
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.03 No.04 (2025)

of 0.05. This signifies that there is no statistically significant disparity in teachers' perspective relative to their academic degrees.

Table 6. *Difference between Teachers' Opinions by Academic Qualification*

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	3.769	26	.145	1.591	.636
Within Groups	25.948	274	.095		
Total	29.717	300			

Table 7 demonstrates the variation in teachers' viewpoints according to their professional credentials. The computed significance value of .392 exceeds the specified significance level of 0.05. This signifies that there is no statistically significant disparity in teachers' perspective relative to their professional degrees.

Table 7. *Difference between Teachers' Opinions by Professional Qualification*

Variables	Category	N	Mean	SD	df	t	Sig.
Professional	B.Ed	144	3.8435	0.31462	301	0.931	0.392
Qualification	M.Ed/MA/MS Edu	157	3.8602	0.29843			

5. Discussion

The first objective of the study was to ascertain the opportunities in assessment practices in English language at secondary level as perceived by teachers. Results revealed that secondary school teachers of ESL perceived that online listening tests, video-based assessment, performance-based assessment, speech recognition software, ORF computer-based assessment tools, portfolio-based assessment, online platforms, and rubric-based assessment can significantly enhance ESL assessment practices.

These findings align with previous research in the field. Ockey and Wagner (2018) highlighted the growing use of integrated listen-speak assessments, while Carr (2014) noted that technology enhances listening assessments by incorporating realistic inputs and engaging objects. The finding regarding speech recognition software as an opportunity is consistent with Chapelle (2019), who emphasized the transformative role of technology in language assessments. The potential of portfolio-based assessment and rubric-based evaluation has been supported by Khaw and Gwee (2016), who argued that rubrics are teaching aids that boost students' self-esteem and encourage them to write more actively.

Regarding reading assessment opportunities, the finding about ORF computer-based assessment tools aligns with Mahmood et al. (2021), who emphasized the importance of assessment literacy in reading. Similarly, the opportunities in writing assessment through online platforms and rubric-based evaluation are consistent with the findings of Al Maawali (2022), who demonstrated that technology-supported collaborative writing improved students' writing abilities.

The second objective of the study was to identify the threats in assessment practices in English language at secondary level as perceived by teachers. The study revealed that secondary school teachers of ESL faced significant threats including the neglect of listening and speaking skills in board examinations, lack of standardized tools, limited access to technological resources, inadequate assessment literacy, heavy workloads, parental pressure for high marks, and bias in assessing written content.

These findings are consistent with the existing literature on ESL assessment in Pakistan. Ashraf and Zaki (2019) revealed that language educators in Pakistan encounter numerous difficulties in language assessment including poor assessment literacy, big classes, and poor language skills of students. The finding regarding the neglect of listening and speaking in board examinations aligns with Javaid et al. (2023), who revealed that secondary

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CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.03 No.04 (2025)

level assessment practices in Pakistan are dominated by memorization and textbook-based teaching where other skills such as speaking are neglected.

The threat of inadequate assessment literacy is supported by Soodmand et al. (2018), who found that teachers' knowledge of alternative assessment methods, academic qualifications, and teaching experience determine their assessment practices. The finding regarding parental pressure for high marks forcing teachers to use traditional tests is consistent with Rind and Mari (2019), who argued that public examinations in Pakistan have long been criticized for placing excessive pressure on students.

The threat of limited access to technological resources aligns with the findings of Akram et al. (2020), who noted that many school-level English language instructors lack basic competencies and resources. Similarly, the threat of heavy workload and course completion preventing detailed continuous assessment is supported by Imran et al. (2024), who found that professional growth, classroom materials, and cultural or family support were key barriers for language education.

The third objective of the study was to ascertain the difference between teachers' perspectives on the basis of demographics. Results revealed that there was no significant difference between teachers' perspectives on the basis of gender, locality, academic qualification, and professional qualification. This finding suggests that the opportunities and threats in ESL assessment practices are perceived similarly across different demographic groups, indicating that these issues are systemic rather than specific to particular groups of teachers.

6. Conclusion

The first objective of the study was to ascertain the opportunities in assessment practices in English language at secondary level as perceived by teachers. Results revealed that secondary school teachers of ESL perceived that online listening tests, video-based assessment, performance-based assessment, speech recognition software, ORF computer-based assessment tools, portfolio-based assessment, online platforms, and rubric-based assessment can significantly enhance ESL assessment practices. These opportunities, if properly utilized, can transform the current assessment landscape in Pakistani secondary schools.

The second objective of the study was to identify the threats in assessment practices in English language at secondary level as perceived by teachers. The study revealed that secondary school teachers of ESL faced significant threats including the neglect of listening and speaking skills in board examinations, lack of standardized tools, limited access to technological resources, inadequate assessment literacy, heavy workloads, parental pressure for high marks, and bias in assessing written content. These threats significantly hinder the effective assessment of English language skills.

The third objective of the study was to ascertain the difference between teachers' perspectives on the basis of demographics. Results revealed that there was no significant difference between teachers' perspectives on the basis of gender, locality, academic qualification, and professional qualification. This indicates that the challenges and opportunities in ESL assessment are perceived uniformly across different demographic groups.

Recommendations

The examination system should be reformed to include the assessment of listening and speaking skills in board examinations, ensuring that these essential skills are given due attention.

Teacher training programs should incorporate assessment literacy development, focusing on modern assessment techniques including portfolio assessment, rubric-based evaluation, and performance-based assessment.

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CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.03 No.04 (2025)

Schools should be equipped with technological resources including language laboratories, audio-visual equipment, and computer-based assessment tools to facilitate effective ESL assessment.

Standardized assessment tools and rubrics should be developed for assessing all four language skills to ensure fairness and reliability in evaluation.

Professional development programs should be arranged to enhance teachers' assessment literacy and their ability to utilize modern assessment techniques effectively.

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ISSN E: 3006-1466
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CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.03 No.04 (2025)

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ISSN E: 3006-1466
ISSN P: 3006-1458
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.03 No.04 (2025)

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