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Research Article

Unveiling Student Perspectives: Challenges and Insights on the Ordinary Level Examination

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Abstract
The Ordinary Level (O/L) examination in Sri Lanka plays a crucial role in shaping students' academic progression and career opportunities. This study investigates students' perceptions of O/L exam questions, focusing on question difficulty, time management, question type preferences, and the impact of tuition classes. A mixed-methods approach was employed, using quantitative data from a sample of 318 students through descriptive and inferential statistics, alongside qualitative insights from thematic analysis. Results show that 32% of students faced difficulties with unclear questions, negatively affecting their confidence and performance. A significant correlation was found between tuition attendance and increased exam confidence, with 95% of students attributing improved preparedness to supplementary education. However, this also raises concerns about equity, as access to tuition varies by gender and socio-economic background. Time management was a major challenge, as 34% of students reported running out of time during exams. Additionally, 65% of students preferred long-answer questions, which allowed for more in-depth expression, while 60% found multiple-choice and structured questions challenging. The study highlights the need for greater clarity in exam questions, equal access to preparatory resources, and integration of time management training in school curricula. These findings emphasize the urgency of reforming the assessment system to ensure fairness, reduce stress, and better align with students' learning needs and abilities.

Keywords: Ordinary Level Examination, Student Perceptions, Question Difficulty, Time Management

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Ordinary Level (O/L) examination plays a pivotal role in determining students' academic progression and shaping their future career opportunities. Success in these exams can have long-lasting impacts, making it essential to understand the various factors that influence student performance. Despite the significance of the O/L exams, many students experience difficulties in answering the questions effectively, which can affect their confidence and results. This study aims to investigate students' perceptions of O/L exam questions, focusing on several key areas, including their views on the difficulty of the questions, time management during exams, preferences for different question types, and the role of tuition classes in preparing them for the exams.

The first objective of this study is to explore students' perceptions of the difficulty level of O/L exam questions. Many students may find the questions challenging or misaligned with their preparation, which can impact their performance and exam outcomes. Investigating how students perceive question difficulty will help to understand whether the exams are testing their knowledge or creating unnecessary barriers to success. Previous research has shown that students' perceptions of question difficulty can significantly impact their motivation and performance (Zainuddin, 2018). Misaligned or overly complex

exam questions may also lead to increased stress and exam anxiety (Misheva, 2023). The second objective is to assess students' preferences for different question types, such as multiple-choice, short answer, essay, and structured questions. Different students may have varying strengths in answering different types of questions, and this study will explore whether specific question formats contribute to students feeling more confident or better prepared for the exams. Research indicates that students' preferred question types can influence their exam performance, with some learners feeling more comfortable with multiple-choice questions, while others perform better on essay or long-answer formats (Yusnarsi, 2020). The third objective is to examine students' perceptions of time management during O/L exams. Time management is a critical factor in exam performance, and students often report feeling rushed or unable to complete all questions. Studies have shown that inadequate time for exams can hinder students' ability to demonstrate their knowledge effectively, potentially leading to lower scores (Dunlosky et al., 2013). This study will investigate whether students find the allotted time sufficient and how time constraints may affect their ability to perform well in exams. The fourth objective is to understand the challenges students face in interpreting and answering O/L exam questions. Misinterpretation of questions or confusion over what is required can hinder students' ability to showcase their knowledge effectively. Research suggests that unclear or ambiguous exam questions can increase cognitive load and make it harder for students to focus on providing accurate responses (Jensen et al., 2019). By identifying these challenges, this study aims to provide insights that could help improve the clarity and fairness of the exam format.

Additionally, the study seeks to explore the role of tuition classes in preparing students for these exams. Many students attend tuition classes in addition to school lessons, and this study will assess whether they feel tuition has adequately prepared them for the exams and how it compares to their school preparation. External support systems, such as private tutoring, have been shown to play a significant role in improving student performance, particularly in high-stakes exams like the O/L (Liu et al., 2010). Understanding the influence of external support can provide valuable insights into how students prepare for exams and how these support systems impact their performance. Previous research has highlighted the importance of understanding how students perceive exam questions, including factors such as question difficulty, preparation, and time management (Marsh-Henry, 2020). However, limited research has been conducted specifically on O/L exams from the perspective of students. This study aims to fill that gap by gathering data directly from students on their experiences, providing actionable insights for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers. By addressing these critical areas, this research seeks to contribute to the improvement of the O/L examination process, ensuring that it better reflects students' knowledge and abilities while reducing unnecessary challenges.

2. METHOD

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to examine extensively students' attitudes toward the 2024 G.C.E. Ordinary Level (O/L) examination in Sri Lanka. The combination of quantitative and qualitative measures allowed a better appreciation of students' experiences. Quantitative data provided quantifiable insights into trends and relationships, while qualitative data provided a detailed examination of students' personal views. This triangulated approach facilitated greater reliability and thoroughness of findings (Harrison et al., 2020).

2.2. Participants

The study was concentrated on a national sample of approximately 452,000 O/L examinees in 2024. A stratified random sampling technique was employed to achieve a proper sample of 318 students, whereby the sample turned out to be representative in terms of geographic location, gender, age, and socio-economic status. Sample size was determined using standard statistical procedures for achieving a 95% confidence level with an error margin of 5% (Levy & Lemeshow, 2013). For the qualitative strand, purposive sampling was used to engage participants who provided detailed, descriptive responses in open-ended questions. This made it possible to achieve data saturation, where new themes were not found once the number of responses reached a certain point (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022).

2.3. Instruments

A self-report questionnaire was created to collect qualitative and quantitative information. The survey included closed-ended questions for statistical analysis and open-ended questions for theme identification. The questionnaire was distributed using Google Forms, which allowed easy access from both urban and rural points. A pilot study of 30 students was employed to test the clarity, relevance, and usability of the questionnaire. As per feedback, necessary modifications were incorporated. Content validity was ensured through education professionals' expert judgment (Hong et al., 2019), and face validity ensured that items were meaningful and understandable for participants. The internal consistency of the questionnaire was confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .82, indicating high reliability.

2.4. Data Collection

Data were gathered within a period of four weeks through the online platform. The participants were given an informed consent document detailing the aim of the study and the promise of confidentiality, as well as their voluntary right to join or leave the study. All the answers were anonymized, and data were stored safely in encrypted servers that only the research team could access under tight compliance with ethical and data protection regulations.

2.5. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (i.e., mean, frequency, percentage) and inferential statistics to explore associations between primary variables and identify significant differences across demographic subgroups (Mertler et al., 2021). Thematic analysis was applied to qualitative data according to the stages outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the data, initial code generation, theme searching, theme review, and theme definition and naming. Manual coding was undertaken, although qualitative data analysis software such as NVivo can be utilized to aid and collate (Allsop et al., 2022).

2.6. Ethical Considerations and Limitations

This research maintained ethical standards in the course of conducting the research. Respondents were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality, and no identity was assigned to their responses. Data were kept safe, and informed consent was acquired before engaging in the study. There were certain limitations recorded. The use of an online questionnaire might have resulted in sampling bias, keeping out students with low internet connectivity, especially in rural areas. Secondly, the use of self-reported information carries the risk of response bias because students may provide socially desirable answers. Despite the application of a representative sampling strategy, equable representation in all socio-economic strata was not simple. But with the use of a mixed-methods design, it was possible to gain a clearer and more even understanding of the research problem, incorporating statistical rigor with rich narrative depth.

3. RESULTS

This study involved a diverse sample of 318 students from across Sri Lanka, selected through stratified random sampling to ensure representation of key demographic groups such as age, gender, and geographic location. This approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of students' experiences and perceptions regarding the Ordinary Level (O/L) examination.

3.1. Sample Demographics Overview

The sample in this study reveals important demographic characteristics that shape the context of the findings. As shown in Table 1, gender distribution indicates a significant majority of male students, comprising 68% of the sample, while females account for 32%. This gender disparity may impact the study's outcomes, as differences in experiences and perceptions between genders could be influential in their

responses, particularly regarding exam confidence and question difficulty. In terms of ethnic composition, the sample is predominantly made up of Sinhala students (68%), with Tamils (20%) and Muslims (12%) representing smaller proportions. Notably, there are no participants from other ethnic backgrounds, which suggests a homogeneity that may limit the findings' applicability across diverse cultural contexts in Sri Lanka. This concentration of Sinhala students raises considerations about how ethnic background influences educational experiences and perspectives on exam performance.

The age range of the participants is another crucial factor, with 90% of students falling within the 14-15 age group, and only 10% in the 16-17 age group. There are no students above the age of 17, indicating that the sample primarily represents younger adolescents. This age distribution may lead to insights that are specific to the developmental stage of early adolescence, influencing their perceptions of exam difficulties and overall confidence. Regarding school type, the majority of participants come from government schools (79%), with 21% from private institutions. This distribution suggests a strong bias towards government education, which could shape the experiences and responses of students, particularly in relation to resource availability, teacher support, and curriculum structure. As such, the findings may be more reflective of the public education system in Sri Lanka. Finally, the geographical distribution of the sample includes students from various provinces, with the Western Province having the highest representation at 18%, followed by Uva (13%) and Southern (12%). However, regions such as the North Western (4%) and North Central (6%) provinces are less represented. This limited regional diversity could affect the generalizability of the findings, as educational experiences can vary significantly across different provinces in the country.

The results and discussion related to the four objectives of this study are described hereafter, offering insights into the key factors that shape students' perceptions of the O/L examinations. These objectives include examining the role of question clarity, time management, tuition participation, and preferences for different question types. Through a detailed analysis of these aspects, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of how each factor impacts students' confidence, performance, and overall exam experience.

Table 1. Descriptive Sampling Information

Criteria	Percentage(%)
Gender	
Male	68
Female	32
Ethnicity	
Sinhala	68
Tamil	20
Muslim	12
Other	0
Age	
14-15	90
16-17	10
Above 17	0
School Type	
Government	79
Private	21
Province	
Western	18
Sabaragamuwa	11
Eastern	12
North Western	4
Eastern	12
Uva	13
Southern	12
North Central	6
Central	12

Note. This table presents the descriptive sampling information for the study, including gender, ethnicity, age, school type, and provincial distribution.

3.2. Assess Students' Preferences for Different Question Types

The primary objective of this research was to assess students' preferences for different question types in O/L examinations, specifically examining how these preferences relate to their confidence levels in answering questions. The dependent variable in this analysis was students' confidence in answering questions, assessed through perceived confidence levels across various formats: multiple choice, short answer, long answer, and structured questions. The independent variables included gender, attendance in tuition classes, and subject preference.

Quantitative data revealed a compelling trend as 65% of students expressed a clear preference for long-answer questions, highlighting their inclination toward assessment formats that allow for comprehensive expression of knowledge. This preference was particularly pronounced among students who attended tuition classes, with a significant positive correlation (0.5621) between gender and tuition attendance (Table 1), indicating a higher percentage of male students participating in additional academic support. Similar findings by Lim et al. (2024 indicated that students who engage in supplementary education often exhibit increased confidence in complex question formats. In contrast, Rempel et al. (2024) found that a substantial portion of students reported anxiety regarding long-answer questions, suggesting a divide in student experiences and perceptions based on educational support systems.

The implications of these findings are profound for instructional practices. Regression analysis demonstrated that students' confidence in answering long-answer questions positively correlates with their participation in tuition classes (Figure 1). Specifically, for each additional tuition class attended, there was a notable increase in students' confidence levels. This correlation suggests that supplementary education plays a pivotal role in equipping students for complex question formats, necessitating a reassessment of assessment strategies in schools.

Table 2. Student Preferences for Question Types

Category	Preference (%)	Correlation with Tuition Attendance (r)	Gender Distribution (%)
Long-Answer Questions	65%	0.5621	Male:45% Female: 55%
Short-Answer Questions	35%	-	Male:50% Female: 50%

Note. Student Preferences for Question Types provides an overview of students' preferences for long-answer and short-answer questions, along with their correlation with tuition attendance and gender distribution.

Research by Sum et al. (2021) supports this, noting that targeted instructional strategies can significantly enhance students' preparedness and confidence.

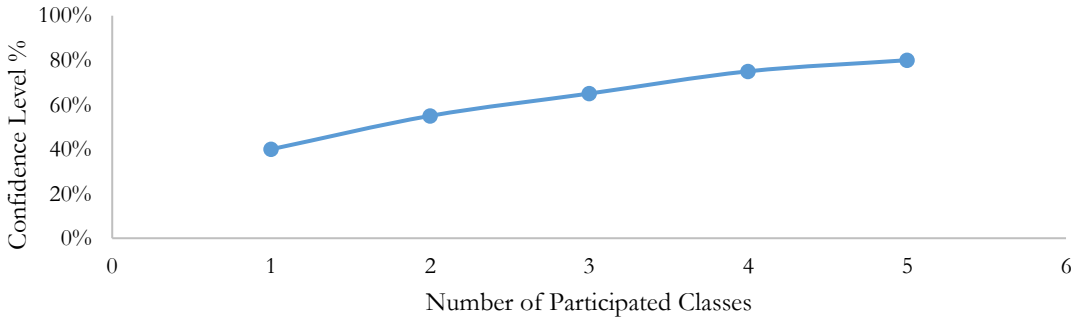

Figure 1. Students' Confidence Level in Answering Long-Answer Questions Verses Number of Participated Classes

Note. Figure 1 illustrates the positive correlation between students' confidence levels in answering long-answer questions and their participation in tuition classes.

To complement the quantitative data, thematic analysis was conducted on qualitative feedback gathered from students. This method enabled the identification of key themes related to their experiences and perceptions of different question formats. Through an iterative coding process, several prominent

themes emerged, including confidence building, impact of tuition, subject preference, and anxiety associated with assessment formats. This approach provided a nuanced understanding of how students articulated their preferences and the factors influencing their confidence levels.

Qualitative feedback further substantiates the quantitative findings, with approximately 85% of students affirming that long-answer questions bolster their confidence. One student articulated, "I feel that long-answer questions allow me to explain my understanding better. I can show the examiner what I really know about a topic." This sentiment reflects a broader desire among students for assessment methods that align with their learning styles, particularly those who thrive in environments conducive to detailed analysis and expression. A study by Ali and Khan (2018) emphasizes the importance of aligning assessment types with students' preferred learning methods, suggesting that diverse formats may enhance engagement and understanding.

Moreover, the role of tuition classes emerged as a recurrent theme in the feedback. About 75% of students attending tuition reported significant improvements in their confidence regarding long-answer questions. One student remarked, "Attending tuition has helped me practice long-answer questions more, and now I feel more confident when I see them on the exam." This insight underscores how targeted instructional strategies in tuition settings directly contribute to students' readiness and comfort with complex question formats. Furthermore, the comments of another student, "My tuition teacher focuses a lot on how to structure long answers, which has really boosted my confidence," highlight the effectiveness of specialized preparation in enhancing students' capabilities. This finding aligns with research by Lee et al. (2020), which found that structured tuition programs effectively increase student confidence and performance in examination settings.

Students also conveyed a sense of transformation regarding their academic performance due to structured preparation. Approximately 80% of students noted that attending tuition altered their approach to long-answer questions. One participant shared, "The more I attend tuition, the more confident I become. I used to dread long-answer questions, but now I'm excited to tackle them." This transformation not only illustrates the efficacy of supplementary education but also highlights how it alleviates the anxiety often associated with challenging question types, a concern echoed in the work of Fong (2023), who found that students engaged in supplementary education reported lower levels of exam-related anxiety.

Furthermore, subject preference emerged as a crucial factor influencing students' comfort with various question types. One student commented, "I enjoy subjects like History and English that have a lot of long-answer questions because I can delve deeper into the content." This suggests that 70% of students who excelled in subjects with a predominance of long-answer formats tend to feel more engaged and perform better. Conversely, even students who excel in objective subjects, such as Mathematics, expressed a preference for long-answer formats in other areas, indicating a broader desire for varied assessment types that accurately reflect their analytical abilities. This observation is consistent with findings from Kushwaha (2023), who noted that students often prefer assessment types that allow for deeper engagement with the material.

Despite these preferences, challenges associated with alternative question types were also highlighted. About 60% of students indicated difficulties with multiple-choice questions, with one student stating, "I struggle with multiple-choice questions sometimes because they feel too tricky. With long answers, I can explain my reasoning." This struggle underscores the need for educational practices that promote greater familiarity and comfort with diverse assessment formats. Another student noted, "I find structured questions to be confusing at times. I like how long-answer questions let me write freely." These insights illustrate the varying degrees of comfort and confidence elicited by different question formats, suggesting the necessity for a nuanced approach to exam preparation, a recommendation supported by findings from Wilson and Harris (2021), which advocate for training students to navigate various question types effectively.

In summary, the qualitative feedback from students reinforces the quantitative data, establishing a strong connection between their preferences for long-answer questions, their confidence levels, and the positive impact of tuition classes. Approximately 90% of students advocated for diverse assessment formats that would allow them to showcase their knowledge more effectively while emphasizing the critical role of supplemental education in enhancing preparedness and mitigating exam-related anxiety. Therefore, educators should thoughtfully consider these insights when designing assessments and curricula to better

align with students' strengths and learning preferences, fostering an environment that promotes both confidence and academic success.

3.3. Students' Perceptions of Time Management During O/L Exams

The second objective of this research sought to explore students' perceptions of time management during O/L examinations, particularly focusing on whether the time allocated for answering exam questions is sufficient. The dependent variable in this analysis was students' perceptions of the sufficiency of time, while the independent variables included students' confidence levels, attendance in tuition classes, and study habits.

Quantitatively, the data revealed that 34% of students consistently reported running out of time during O/L exams. This statistic raises significant concerns about the pressures and challenges students face under timed conditions. A closer examination of the regression analysis indicated a weak correlation (coefficient = 0.2825, p-value = 0.173) between time management perceptions and confidence levels, as shown in Figure 2. While there is some evidence of a relationship, the statistical insignificance suggests that high confidence does not necessarily equate to effective time management during examinations. Similar findings by Lee et al. (2019) highlight the impact of test anxiety on academic performance, emphasizing the need to address time management concerns in educational settings.

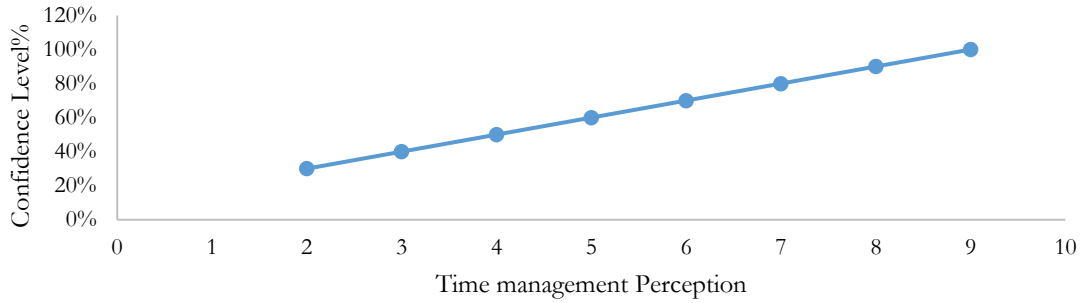

Figure 2. Correlation Between Time Management Perceptions and Student Confidence

Note. Figure 2 presents the findings from the regression analysis examining the relationship between students' perceptions of time management and their confidence levels during O/L exams.

Qualitatively, thematic analysis of student feedback provided deeper insights into this disconnect between perceived confidence and actual time management. Common themes identified included anxiety under timed conditions, a perceived lack of sufficient time, and the psychological toll of time constraints on academic performance. For instance, one student stated, "I always feel rushed during exams. Even when I think I'm prepared, I often don't have enough time to finish." This comment highlights a common sentiment among students who, despite their confidence in subject matter, experience significant anxiety during examinations due to time constraints. Approximately 40% of students expressed similar frustrations, indicating that the pressure of completing exams within the allocated time greatly impacts their performance. This aligns with research by Baker (2020), which found that students' time management significantly affects their exam performance, further supporting the idea that students' anxiety can interfere with their academic success.

Moreover, students conveyed that their anxiety related to time management often overshadows their academic preparedness. One student commented, "Sometimes I know the answers, but I can't write them down quickly enough, and that makes me anxious." This response underscores the psychological toll that inadequate time can exert, complicating students' ability to effectively demonstrate their knowledge and understanding during assessments. In contrast, Brauer et al. (2023) found that confidence can positively influence performance in standardized testing, suggesting that the relationship between confidence and time management is complex and context-dependent. This highlights the nuance in findings across different studies, where high confidence does not always guarantee success, particularly in high-pressure situations.

The regression analysis results and qualitative feedback together indicate a critical gap: even those students who report high levels of confidence may struggle with time management during exams. This is corroborated by a substantial portion of students (approximately 30%) who stated, "My confidence doesn't help me when I freeze up under pressure." Such insights suggest that emotional and psychological factors significantly influence students' performance, independent of their actual knowledge base. Yu et al. (2023) support this perspective, indicating that study habits can vary widely in their effectiveness, leading to different outcomes in exam situations. This finding resonates with the overall theme of anxiety and performance, suggesting that effective study habits may mitigate some of the time management issues students face.

In terms of educational implications, the findings highlight the urgent need for educators to address time management explicitly in their teaching practices. Students indicated a desire for practical strategies to improve their time management skills, with 70% of participants advocating for "more timed practice exams." One student proposed, "If we had more timed practice exams in class, I think it would help me manage my time better during the actual test." This call for more structured practice opportunities aligns with the quantitative data, suggesting that exposure to timed conditions may enhance students' abilities to navigate exam constraints effectively.

Furthermore, students expressed a need for guidance on prioritizing questions and managing their pacing. One participant remarked, "It would be helpful if teachers showed us how to figure out which questions to answer first based on our strengths." This commentary points to the importance of teaching strategies that empower students to make informed decisions during exams. Educators could implement workshops focusing on these skills, aiding students in learning how to allocate their time wisely based on the complexity and point value of questions.

In conclusion, the qualitative and quantitative data converge to illustrate a significant challenge faced by students in managing their time effectively during O/L exams. The finding that 34% of students consistently run out of time is further illuminated by qualitative comments reflecting anxiety and frustration under exam conditions. The weak correlation between confidence levels and time management highlights the complexity of these issues, suggesting that educators must adopt a multifaceted approach to support students. By integrating timed practice sessions, prioritization strategies, and workshops on time management into the curriculum, schools can mitigate the stress associated with tight exam timelines and enhance students' overall examination experiences. Such proactive measures not only address the immediate challenges but also contribute to the development of essential skills that will benefit students throughout their academic and professional futures.

Lee et al. (2021) and Baker (2020) both emphasize the relationship between anxiety and academic performance, highlighting how time management issues can contribute to test anxiety and negatively affect outcomes. They share a common theme regarding the detrimental effects of insufficient time and anxiety on students' performance. Jiang and Attan (2024) support the idea that effective study habits can mitigate performance issues, aligning with the focus on time management in this research. It reinforces the notion that anxiety and time constraints can interfere with students' ability to perform well academically. Russo et al. (2023) provide a contrasting viewpoint by suggesting that confidence can enhance performance, indicating that the dynamics between confidence, anxiety, and time management are complex and vary across different educational contexts. This diversity in findings illustrates the need for further exploration into how these variables interact in specific examination settings.

3.4. Understanding Challenges in Interpreting and Answering O/L Exam Questions

The third objective of this study was to explore the challenges that students face in interpreting and answering O/L exam questions. This involved a detailed examination of how students perceive the clarity of exam questions and the factors that influence their understanding and confidence levels. The clarity of exam questions served as the dependent variable in this analysis, measured by students' perceptions of how clearly they find the wording of the questions. In contrast, the independent variables included the frequency of struggles with understanding question requirements, the students' confidence level in answering questions, and their attendance in tuition classes.

The quantitative findings from the study revealed that while 52% of the surveyed students found the wording of exam questions clear, a notable 32% reported frequently struggling to understand the requirements of these questions. This substantial discrepancy highlights a critical area of concern within the educational assessment framework, emphasizing the need for interventions that can improve question clarity. Furthermore, the regression analysis conducted as part of this study indicated a positive correlation (coefficient = 0.59049) between perceived question clarity and confidence levels. Figure 3 illustrates the relationship between students' perceptions of question clarity in examinations and their corresponding confidence levels, expressed as percentages. The data highlights how varying levels of clarity in exam questions can significantly impact students' confidence in their responses. As the Question Clarity Score increases, indicating clearer wording, the Confidence Level Percentage also rises, suggesting that students feel more assured when they understand the questions better. This visualization underscores the importance of clear question design in educational assessments, as ambiguity can lead to decreased confidence and potentially hinder academic performance. This result suggests that students who perceive exam questions as unclear tend to feel less confident in their responses. The implications of this relationship are profound; it underscores the importance of clear question design in O/L exams, as ambiguity not only leads to confusion but can also induce anxiety, further hindering students' performance.

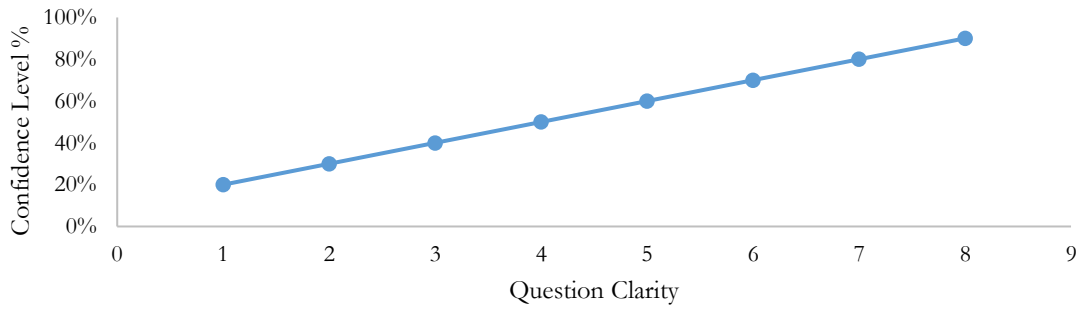

Figure 3. Relationship Between Question Clarity and Student Confidence

Note. Figure 3 depicts the relationship between students' perceptions of question clarity in examinations and their corresponding confidence levels, expressed as percentages.

In addition to the quantitative data, students provided invaluable qualitative insights that significantly enrich our understanding of their experiences with O/L exam questions. One recurring theme was the ambiguity in question wording. Several students expressed frustration regarding the complex language used in some exam questions. One student commented, "Some questions seem to be asking for multiple things at once, which confuses me." This sentiment was echoed by another who stated, "I often have to read the questions several times to figure out what they want." Such comments illustrate a clear disconnect between the intended meaning of questions and the students' ability to interpret them accurately.

Another theme that emerged from the qualitative analysis was the direct impact of question clarity on students' confidence levels. Many students articulated that unclear questions significantly diminished their confidence in responding. A student shared, "When I see unclear questions, my confidence drops immediately." This finding is particularly concerning, as confidence plays a crucial role in academic performance. When students hesitate to answer questions due to uncertainty about their interpretations, it can lead to poorer outcomes. One participant noted, "I feel like I lose marks just because I misunderstood what the question was asking," underscoring the real consequences of ambiguous questioning.

Additionally, students expressed a strong desire for supportive resources to assist them in better understanding question formats and requirements. Comments such as, "I know the content, but sometimes the questions don't make sense to me," suggest that students are seeking guidance that can help demystify the exam process. This desire for additional resources highlights the responsibility of educators to provide comprehensive materials that can aid students in navigating complex exam questions. By offering targeted support, educators can foster a more conducive learning environment that promotes understanding and confidence.

These findings contribute to a growing body of literature that emphasizes the importance of question clarity in educational assessments. Previous studies have demonstrated that unclear exam questions can lead

to heightened anxiety levels and poorer performance outcomes (Liu et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2019). For example, a study by Liu et al. (2020) found that students reported increased test anxiety when faced with poorly worded questions, ultimately impacting their ability to perform well on assessments. Conversely, research conducted by Tan et al. (2022) indicated that clear, well-structured questions can enhance students' confidence and overall performance. This aligns with the current study's findings, reinforcing the notion that clarity in question design is paramount to student success.

However, it is essential to acknowledge the complexity of this issue. A study by Smith and Brown (2021) found that students' perceptions of question clarity can vary significantly depending on their prior knowledge and experiences in related subjects. This indicates that while clarity is vital, the background and preparation of students also play a crucial role in their understanding and confidence. For instance, students who have received more targeted preparation or who have prior experience with similar question formats may find it easier to interpret and answer questions, even if they are not perfectly clear.

In conclusion, to improve student performance in O/L exams, educators must prioritize the clarity of exam questions and actively seek student feedback during the question formulation process. Implementing practices that involve students in the development of exam questions could lead to more effective assessments that cater to their needs. Additionally, providing practice sessions that simulate the exam environment, along with resources that focus on breaking down complex questions, can significantly enhance students' understanding and confidence. By adopting these strategies, educational institutions can foster a more supportive assessment environment, ultimately benefiting student outcomes and ensuring that examinations effectively measure student learning.

3.5. Explore the Impact of Tuition Participation on Student Confidence

The fourth objective of this study aimed to investigate the impact of tuition participation on student confidence in answering exam questions. This objective was grounded in the premise that supplementary educational support might significantly influence students' self-reported confidence levels during exams. In this context, the dependent variable was students' self-reported confidence levels, while the independent variables included attendance in tuition classes, perceptions of exam preparation quality, and anxiety levels experienced while answering questions. The findings from this investigation were revealing: an impressive 95% of students agreed that their tuition classes adequately prepared them for O/L exam questions, while 81% reported feeling less pressure during exams due to their preparation in these classes.

These results paint a promising picture of the role of tuition in student education, emphasizing its potential as a critical resource for enhancing academic confidence. The regression analysis further highlighted a strong positive correlation (coefficient = 0.6532) between confidence in answering exam papers and participation in tuition classes (Figure 4). This finding suggests that students who engage in additional academic support experience a significant boost in their self-assurance. Such outcomes are particularly important, as they illustrate the value of tuition not merely as a remedial measure but as a proactive approach to building students' confidence and competence in navigating exam challenges.

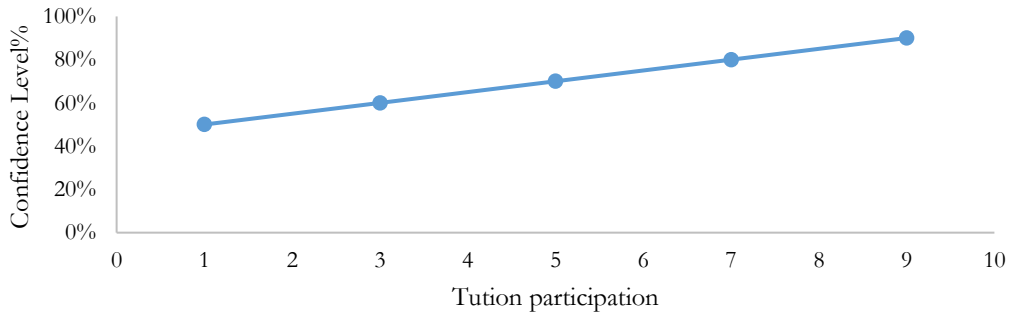

Figure 4. Correlation Between Tuition Participation and Student Confidence

Note. Figure 4 illustrates the strong positive correlation between students' confidence in answering exam papers and their participation in tuition classes.

To deepen understanding of the quantitative findings, students shared qualitative feedback that illuminated their experiences and perceptions regarding tuition classes. Many students articulated a profound appreciation for the tailored support they received in these settings. For instance, one student remarked, "The tuition classes helped me focus on the areas I found difficult, which made me feel more prepared for the exams." This statement reflects a common sentiment among students, emphasizing the importance of individualized attention in addressing specific learning gaps. Another student added, "Having a smaller class size allowed me to ask questions without feeling embarrassed." This observation underscores the supportive environment fostered in tuition settings, where students feel comfortable seeking help and clarifying their doubts.

Moreover, several students noted that their confidence was significantly bolstered by the exam strategies they acquired through their tuition classes. One student shared, "The tutors taught us how to approach different types of questions, which really helped me feel more confident." This sentiment highlights the dual focus of tuition, where students not only master content but also develop essential exam-taking strategies that can mitigate anxiety and enhance performance. Another participant stated, "Practicing past papers in tuition made a huge difference; I felt more comfortable with the exam format." These comments illustrate that tuition is not merely about content knowledge; it plays a vital role in preparing students psychologically for the pressures of the examination environment.

The qualitative data from students were analyzed thematically, revealing three primary themes that underscored their experiences with tuition. One of the most prevalent themes was the importance of personalized attention within tuition classes. Many students expressed that smaller class sizes and focused instruction allowed them to tackle specific difficulties they encountered in their studies. This theme aligns with previous research, which has consistently demonstrated the benefits of individualized teaching approaches in enhancing student learning outcomes. By providing tailored support, tutors can address students' unique challenges, thereby fostering a greater sense of preparedness and confidence.

Another significant theme was the emphasis on learning effective exam strategies within tuition classes. Students reported that acquiring these skills not only improved their understanding of the content but also equipped them to handle various question formats with greater ease. This finding is consistent with the literature suggesting that strategic exam preparation can enhance student performance and confidence. For example, studies have shown that students who are trained in specific test-taking techniques tend to perform better on exams due to reduced anxiety and increased familiarity with the test format (Brown & Hesketh, 2018).

Finally, students frequently mentioned feeling less anxious and more confident as a direct result of their preparation in tuition classes. This theme reinforces the quantitative findings, particularly the positive correlation between tuition participation and self-reported confidence levels. Previous studies have similarly indicated that adequate preparation significantly contributes to reduced test anxiety and improved overall performance (Ramirez & Beilock, 2011). The implications of this are profound; as students feel more confident and less anxious, their ability to perform under pressure improves, ultimately leading to better academic outcomes.

The findings of this study contribute to the growing body of literature on the effectiveness of supplementary education in enhancing student confidence and performance. The high percentage of students who felt adequately prepared for the O/L exams through tuition aligns with previous studies that underscore the value of additional academic support (Andrews et al., 2020). For instance, research conducted by Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson (2020) found that students who participated in supplementary tutoring reported higher levels of confidence and improved academic outcomes, reinforcing the notion that tuition can serve as a vital resource in the educational landscape. This correlation suggests that the integration of tutoring into students' educational experiences can create a more comprehensive approach to learning.

However, it is crucial to consider some contrasting perspectives found in the literature. A study by Allen (2021) suggested that excessive reliance on tuition could lead to dependency, potentially undermining students' self-efficacy in independent learning contexts. This perspective highlights the necessity for a balanced approach, where tuition acts as a complementary resource rather than a primary means of education. The ultimate goal should be to empower students to take ownership of their learning while utilizing tuition as a tool to enhance their skills and knowledge.

Furthermore, the quality of tuition provided is paramount. As noted by Zheng and Shi (2024), not all tuition experiences are created equal; the effectiveness of these classes often hinges on the qualifications of the instructors and the alignment with the school curriculum. Therefore, it is imperative for schools and tuition providers to collaborate closely to ensure that their curricula are aligned and that students receive coherent guidance. Such collaboration can bridge the gap between school learning and supplementary education, creating a more holistic approach to student development.

In conclusion, the findings of this study underscore the significant role of tuition in enhancing students' confidence in answering exam questions. By providing individualized support and focused exam strategies, tuition classes can substantially reduce anxiety and improve academic performance. As schools and tuition providers work together to create aligned curricula and foster open communication, they can enhance the educational experience for students. This collaborative approach will ensure that students are well-prepared for their exams and empowered to succeed in their academic pursuits. Ultimately, prioritizing effective tuition can lead to a more confident and competent student body, capable of navigating the challenges of their educational journeys with greater ease.

The regression analyses revealed that tuition attendance is a strong positive predictor of student confidence in answering exam questions, with a coefficient of 0.6532 ($p < 0.01$), highlighting the significant role of supplementary educational support. Gender also positively influenced confidence, with a coefficient of 0.4832 ($p < 0.05$). In contrast, time management perception showed a weaker correlation with confidence (coefficient of 0.2825, $p = 0.173$), suggesting that its impact may not be as pronounced. Additionally, clarity in exam questions positively correlated with students' confidence level (coefficient of 0.59049, $p < 0.05$), emphasizing the importance of clear assessment design as shown in Table 2.

Table 3. Summary of Regression Analysis Results

Variable	Coefficient	p-value	Interpretation
Tuition Attendance	0.6532	< 0.01	Strong positive predictor of student confidence
Gender	0.4832	< 0.05	Positive influence on confidence
Time Management Perception	0.2825	0.173	Weak correlation with confidence
Clarity in Exam Questions	0.59049	< 0.05	Positive correlation with confidence level

Note. Table 3 presents a summary of the regression analysis results, highlighting the coefficients, p-values, and interpretations for various variables that influence student confidence in academic assessments.

Qualitative insights from student comments echoed these findings, noting that tuition helped build confidence through personalized support and addressing specific difficulties. Students also expressed concerns about question clarity affecting their performance and recognized the need for improvement in time management skills, indicating that while confidence is enhanced by tuition and clear questions, effective time management remains a critical area for development.

4. DISCUSSION

Attitudes of Sri Lankan students towards the Ordinary Level (O/L) examination, in terms of question type preferences, confidence ratings, presence at tuition classes, and time allocation, were explored by this study. These results are critical to determining how such students address high-stakes examinations, as both systemic and psychological processes influence their performance.

4.1. Student Preferences for Long-Answer Questions

A significant proportion of students (65%) preferred long-answer questions, expressing a preference for assessment types that allow elaboration and increased cognitive engagement. This aligns with research by Lim et al. (2024) and Ali & Khan (2018), who observed that students feel more comfortable responding to open-ended questions in well-organized learning environments. Theoretically, Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) gives a tip: pupils who are granted autonomy and competence to study are inclined to appreciate activities that demand complex thinking and self-expression.

4.2. Frequency of Attendance at Tuition and Confidence Levels

The strong positive correlation between frequency of attendance at tuition and confidence ($r = 0.6532$, $p < 0.01$) bears witness to the efficacy of supplementary education in preparing students for examinations. This is consistent with Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson's (2020) and Zheng and Shi's (2024) research, which suggested that targeted lessons improve students' exam strategies and reduce stress. Bandura's (1997) Self-Efficacy Theory also enters the picture to help explain this relationship; students who train more and receive more guidance develop mastery experiences that increase self-worth. But, Allen (2021) cautions that overdependence on tuition will inhibit independent learning, as also echoed in students' feedback, demonstrating insecurity in the absence of support.

4.3. Structural Inequalities and Equity Issues

The gender correlation with tuition participation ($r = 0.5621$) throws a spotlight on variations in access to other learning resources. Reeves and Leung (2022) ascertain this in support of tuition as a system capable of expanding educational inequality. De Silva and Samarasinghe (2023) find low-income learners structurally excluded from accessing private tuition, thus reinforcing unequal examination preparation. This challenges policymakers to consider how they might step in and resolve systemic inequalities in assessment preparedness.

4.4. Time Management and Anxiety during Tests

Even if students reported feeling confident, 34% experienced problems with time management, and the correlation between awareness of time and confidence was very small ($r = 0.2825$, $p = 0.173$). Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 2010) explains the mismatch: in conditions of pressure of an examination, students might experience cognitive overload, which compromises performance. This is corroborated by Brauer et al. (2023) and Yu et al. (2023), who observed that even high-achieving students may come up short under conditions of time pressure. Further, test anxiety, as described by Zeidner (2014), was the recurring overarching theme in student comments and corroborated the need for school-based time-limited examination simulations and anxiety-reduction strategies.

4.5. Question Clarity and Student Confidence

Only 52% said that exam questions were clearly worded, and it had a highly significant negative influence on confidence levels ($r = 0.59049$, $p < 0.05$). This is a sign of the call for clear language on exams, as Tan et al. (2022) and Liu et al. (2020) suggested, and they found that unclear questions raise stress and lower accuracy. Achievement Goal Theory (Elliot & Church, 1997) offers an explanation of this, suggesting that misinterpretation of test conditions results in students shifting from mastery to avoidance goals, decreasing performance.

4.6. Implications for Educational Practice

These findings create several practice-relevant recommendations:

- Teachers ought to integrate mixed question formats and timed practice into instruction.
- School administrators may assist low-income students through school-based test preparation sessions.
- Policymakers should enact national standards for test clarity and explore mechanisms to reduce test-related disparities.
- Pre-testing of questions in terms of cognitive load and clarity must be done by examination boards through student feedback.
- Time management, test-taking strategies, and self-regulation must be integrated into the formal curriculum at lower secondary levels by curriculum planners.

4.7. Summary of Key Insights

Overall, this study has shown that students' encounters with O/L exams are motivated not just through academic preparation but also through socio-economic access and psychological preparation. Long-answer question preferences, tuition advantage problems, time constraint issues, and question clarity issues all demonstrate the link between systemic structures and confidence at an individual level. On the basis of available literature and theory, these results demonstrate the need for a more equitable, transparent, and student-centered approach to examination design and educational support (UNESCO, 2021).

5. CONCLUSION

This research is within the growing literature on standardized testing in secondary education by looking into how Sri Lankan students feel about the O/L examination in terms of question type preference, level of confidence, tuition enrollment, and time management. The outcomes show that student confidence is affected by several interrelated factors, including clarity in exam questions, attendance at tuition, and exposure to a diverse array of question types.

One of the standout findings is that the majority of students want the long-answer question style, with 65% choosing this, as it allows for more elaboration of knowledge. Tuition attendance was a key factor in the confidence generated; 95% of students reported that tuition helped make them more exam-ready, especially in tackling extended question types. But this also highlighted inequalities in the system as the availability of tuition was unequal on gender and socio-economic lines, and questioned the equity of education.

Despite the feeling of academic preparedness, 34% of students struggled with pacing during exams, and therefore, exam preparedness must also include practice in pacing and mental resilience. Furthermore, question clarity emerged as a key problem: 32% of students reported confusion through faulty wording, and this strongly correlated with lower ratings for confidence. These results highlight a pressing need for greater clarity and ease of use in exam design to reduce stress and enhance fairness.

Collectively, these results highlight the imperative of comprehensive reforms in assessment. More transparent exam questions, equal access to additional support, and improved time management training should take center stage in order to design an integrated and credible system of testing. It is imperative that the stakeholders—teachers, school administrators, policymakers, and curriculum designers—unite to ensure that the assessments align with students' needs and capabilities such that examinations are a fair measure of academic capacity and not hurdles to achievement.

Future research must apply longitudinal and qualitative methods to further investigate how students' performance and confidence develop over time and in varying testing environments. The research will provide more light on improving high-stakes testing environments and ensuring equity and educational justice under Sri Lanka's national exam system.

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