

Teachers' Perspectives on School-Based Oral English Assessment in an International Primary School in Malaysia

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Abstract

School-based assessment is a holistic assessment system that replaces the traditional national examination system in Malaysia. This paper focuses on the challenges and effectiveness of SBA implementation on assessing the students' English language speaking skills as perceived by the teachers. The method of data collection is through semi-structured interviews with 3 primary English teachers teaching in a primary international in the USJ area. Data collected were analysed and categorised into themes. The SBA can be considered effective because its sole purpose of oral is to develop student's speaking skills in the target language interactively. The teachers had used different methods to assess the students speaking skills and challenges had been faced by the teacher are due to lack of guidance such as appropriate rubrics and materials. We anticipate that the Ministry of Education would take further steps to provide the necessary materials to make the assessment more effective.

Keywords: School-based assessment, effectiveness of SBA, English language speaking assessment, SBA in primary school

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Modern day global innovations and advancements in the education field have put much pressure over the Malaysian traditional education system. In Malaysia, national examination used to be the epitome of assessment in schools. However, the huge flaw in the centralised education and examination system is that it can no longer cater to the expectations and demands of the ever modernising education transformations. Public examinations have serious effects over both teacher and students in regards to washback effects where the students' learning needs are overlooked and teaching objective diverts towards obtaining marks. (Adnan & Mahmood, 2014) With the vision of putting the Malaysian education in line with global demands, the education system is long due for an upgrade to ensure educational progress among the Malaysian students and to accommodate to their future needs and global advancements. In 2011, the Ministry of Education launched a new policy to be implemented in primary schools; SBA replaced the outdated centralised examination system. This is being done to complement what centralised examination could no longer cater and to alleviate the weight of written summative examinations, granting emphasis on measuring holistic progressive achievements. The implementation of SBA in schools benefits both students and teachers as teaching and learning evaluation is school specific. School-based assessment provides flexibility to teachers constructing their tasks as the students are evaluated based on the school standards and information as opposed to nationwide information being practiced through national examinations. (Mansoret al., 2013)

SBA is also being practiced in private and international schools in Malaysia. Many other countries such as Australia, England and Hong Kong have gone through various changes in their education system and have implemented SBA for some time. Increasing numbers of countries are adapting SBA to their education system over the recent past. (Darling-Hammond & McCloskey, 2008) SBA is still fairly young in the Malaysian education system; the Malaysian teachers teaching in international schools are nonetheless only recently exposed to the new method of assessment. Although international schools and public schools in Malaysia use SBA, our target school practices SBA according to the Cambridge Primary Syllabus. In contrast to the Oral English Assessment system used in public primary schools, the Cambridge Primary English as Second Language curriculum assess the students' speaking based on a comprehensive set of objectives. These objectives cater to English as Second Language learners and are divided into 5 progressive stages respectively. (Cambridge International Examination, 2013)

The focus of the SBA implementation in this paper is on the assessment of the students' English speaking skills. This paper aims to complement the researches conducted on SBA in Malaysia by providing deeper

insights of its implementation by interviewing Malaysian English language teachers who teach using a different set of syllabus which is the Cambridge Primary Syllabus to the students from various backgrounds.

1.1 Research Questions

There are two research questions which have been constructed as a guide for this paper. The research questions are as follows:

1. What are the challenges faced by the teachers when implementing school-based oral English assessment?
2. What are the teachers' perceptions on the effectiveness of school-based oral English assessment on the students' academic performance?

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of literature comprises two sections: school-based assessment and designing oral assessment.

2.1 School-based Assessment (SBA)

There are two traditional purposes for assessment: communicating results of student achievement, and organizing students for entry into various programmes (Robertson, 2005). Besides, assessment promotes student learning, teacher effectiveness and student engagement with the material (McMillan, 2004). It should be able to show ongoing improvement and help students focus on their own learning; the measurement methods should be consistent, increase student's understanding and provide them opportunities to learn and reflect on their own learning outcomes (Heady, 2000).

The five recent purposes of assessment are to select, certify, describe, facilitate learning and improve teaching which give a balance to public judgment and personal development (Freeman & Lewis, 1998). It is an ongoing process involving several things done at various time periods, instead of one thing done at one time (Tombari & Borich, 1999). However, Black, Harrison & Lee (2003) pointed out that assessment methods are very isolated from normal teaching and learning, thus do not necessarily promote student learning. Nevertheless, Stiggins (2004) noted that assessment is the process of gathering evidence of student learning to inform instructional decisions. He provided five quality standards of accurate classroom assessment: serve a specific purpose, arise from clear and appropriate achievement targets, rely on a proper assessment method, sample student achievement appropriately, and eliminate distortion of results due to bias. SBA can help to increase students' involvement through keeping reading records and journals, and participating in group discussions. Teachers can also "encourage learners to monitor improvements in their performance over time through repeated self-assessment" (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2005). In school-based Oral English Assessment (OEA), students are given feedback on their assessment where they may choose to redo the assessment until both them and their teacher are satisfied with the grade. According to a research made by Majid, Samad & Vethamani (2011), "the students were more insightful, seeing beyond the Oral English Test (OET) in class as compared to the opinions of the OET of the teachers, even in the changes to the test suggested". Therefore, both parties are completely involved in the teaching and learning process through OEA.

Since teachers play a vital role in the assessment processes, it is crucial that they are well equipped in this area. Their commitment and competency are necessary to make any assessment successfully. Torrance (1995) stated that teachers engaged and performed well in assessment practices when they were clear with the meaning and changes that need to be incorporated into the implementation. Although SBA is a powerful instructional tool, it cannot be achieved until and unless teachers understand the concept of SBA and possess the knowledge, skills and attitudes to practice it effectively (Chapman & Snyder, 2000).

In the Malaysian context, Chan & Sidhu's (2006) report showed that the school-based oral English assessment is still peppered with problems. Their findings revealed that a huge portion of teachers were not properly equipped with the knowledge of SBA. Hence, the level of implementation of SBA at the grassroots level is very unsatisfactory.

Egyud, Gal & Glover (2001) conducted a study on training language teachers for new ways of assessment, and mentioned that language teachers need to be part of the team of designing and validating a language assessment through an ongoing support system. In order for any new assessment system to be successful, its implementation should work in line with extensive school-based exploration of the problems and possibilities of new approaches to assessment. Therefore, teachers need all the necessary guidance in matters pertaining to a new assessment system (Begum & Farooqui, 2008).

2.2 Designing Oral Assessment

The primary objective of teaching spoken language is to develop the ability to interact successfully in the target language in terms of comprehension and production (Hughes, 2001). However, the assessment of oral English in the Malaysian education context is backgrounded to a larger extent, because reading and writing skills are very much more emphasised in the public exam formats (Sidhu, Chan & Mohamad, 2011). Moreover, written assessments can be administered with ease to multiple students at one go, while administering oral assessments simultaneously is chaotically impractical. Hence, assessing oral English comes with a myriad of challenges.

The main challenge is to design tasks that elicit spoken language of the type and quantity that will allow meaningful inferences to be drawn from scores to the student's ability on the construct that the test is interested to measure (Fulcher, 2003). What the teachers are looking for in an oral English assessment is the student's ability to perform in a wider range of situations than required in the given prompts (Hartley & Sporing, 1999). The integration of speaking tasks in daily English lessons provides such opportunities for assessment (Sidhu et al., 2011).

Before beginning the process to assess oral English, the teacher must know what kind of speaking they intend to test on the student (Luoma, 2004). The construct being measured must have scores that can be inferred and the task posed to the student must be measurable (Fulcher, 2003). Besides, steps should be taken to ensure credible procedures are established in the test design and rating score whether the final assessment score calls for single or multiple raters. This consideration is frequently neglected in the ESL/EFL classroom assessment procedures where textbooks are heavily relied on which do not always meet the construct of the oral assessment designed for the students (Luoma, 2004).

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The present study employs the qualitative design and data were collected through semi-structured interviews in order to acquire information on SBA holistically and in-depth using small samples (Ary, Jacobs & Sorensen, 2010). The intended result is a rich, comprehensive narrative report depicting the social reality experienced by the respondents.

Prior to conducting the interviews, a brainstorming session was conducted with colleagues in the teaching profession to generate interview questions pertaining to the RQs of the present study. Then, the questions were fine-tuned with the help of an expert in the faculty. Each interview session was audio recorded with permission of the respondents and then transcribed for analysis.

3.2 Samples

For this study, three primary English language teachers involved in SBA in an international school in USJ were selected as respondents. This selection was based on purposive sampling where they are selected because their current profession and pedagogical practices of SBA are representative of the general school teacher population (Ary et al., 2010). Moreover, they are easily accessible to some of the researchers of the study, and this makes the sampling a practical one. All the three teachers have different education and working background before they start their career as teachers in the school. One teacher studied for ESL but she worked for four years in a corporate company. The second respondent did her studies in children psychology and worked as a teacher in APSS international school for three years. The third respondent is a retired English teacher and she did her PhD in TESL. She taught English subject for 30 years and worked as a principal in SMK Puchong 2.

3.3 Research Location

The school where we collected our data was Eagles International. It is situated in USJ, which is a well-developed place and the school is located in the city. It is equipped with all the facilities and well accessed. This school is newly opened under JNJ Group and has been operating successfully for 11 months. The president of this school is the founder of Noble International School, Rev Eu Hong Seng. This is the third school created under JNJ Group. The enrolment of students in the beginning was 55 students and increased gradually to 62 students up to the month of October. There are 13 teachers who are teaching various subjects from primary and secondary levels. The school has two levels and each year has only one class. Each class has a maximum of 17 students. The environment of the school is conducive for learning. Each class has spacious space to accommodate the students as well as the equipment like projectors and boards. On top of that, the school has few sets of laptops to be used by the students. There are also places for students to have Physical Education and also a badminton court for students to practice the sport with the guidance of a coach. The students are from different backgrounds. All of them have difficulties in speaking as they come from Chinese schools and only few of them come from other international school, such as Kingsley and UCSI international schools. Majority of the students could not speak in proper English as their previous school did not emphasise in that language. On top of that, they do not get similar support from family as they are from Chinese speaking families. The children had to rely solely on the teachers as the only time for them to use English is during the school period. All the subjects are conducted in English except Malay and Mandarin languages. As the school follows IGCSE syllabus, all the subjects are conducted in English language. So, by hook or by crook, the children had to learn the language by all means.

4.0 FINDINGS

The analysis of the data collected started as soon as the interviews were conducted successfully. We conducted interview with three teachers regarding school based assessment. The respondents were interviewed individually and the data were collected accordingly to the responses from the teachers in accordance with the research questions. The individual responses from the teachers were used to answer our two research questions. From the responses, we can say that school-based oral assessment in school has been effective.

4.1 Perceptions of Teachers on Oral Assessment

All three teachers understand the basic understandings of school based assessment. Basically, they mentioned that SBA is an assessment that held and conducted for students by their own subject teachers using the guideline provided by the schools. A teacher mentioned that;

“SBA is being held for the students within the school standards and regulations. That’s what I understand by SBA.”

Another teacher corresponded with the statement made by the earlier teacher by saying that;

“What I understand from SBA is it’s a form of assessment that set by the school by the teachers and evaluates the students based on the school standards instead of an external body or organisation that marks and evaluates the students.”

All the respondents were able to deliver their understanding of the School Based Assessment. For the question asked regarding the effect of the implementation of the oral skills assessment, only one teacher agreed 100% by saying that she could say for sure that the implementation has been positive as students managed to speak based on the questions given during the assessment. The second respondent mentioned that she did not see any distinction effectiveness in the execution of the oral assessment based on SBA. She stated that;

“In my opinion, I have not actually seen any effective improvement or deterioration in the students’ performance as far as I am concerned. Why do I say this because from the oral skill assessment that I have conducted for my students, I don’t see a big difference negatively or positively in their evaluation.”

These answer our second research question on the teachers’ perceptions of school based oral English assessment on the students’ academic performance.

4.2 Methods Used To Evaluate and Carry Out The Assessment

Two out the three teachers changed their teaching materials to improve students’ speaking skills. Respondent number two did not use or change the materials and method as she stated that;

“because the oral skill, from my opinion, it don’t cover sufficiently the speaking parameter or criterion that the student do need. So usually I’ve not actually change my teaching methods because I believe that the speaking skills that I have thought in class are actually are more encompassing and more wholesome compare to the oral speaking assessment.”

She believed that her materials and methods cover the criteria of the oral assessment better compared to the outlines by the school. Other two teachers agreed that the implementation of the school based oral assessment enabled them to use different teaching materials to improve the speaking skills of the students. This is supported by the statement given by the third teacher,

“...because it is important to explore any available materials in order to improve and improvise the students speaking skills and to not use a variety of materials will only cause the students to lose out in their long run.”

The effectiveness of the oral assessment is very subjective as different teachers have different views on the issue. Based on the interview, the first respondent revealed that the assessment is effective as she can see improvement in the students’ oral skills. They were able to give opinions based on the pictures shown during the assessment. However, another teacher could not surely say that the assessment has proven to be effective as she stated that;

“...I do not see vast or distinct difference in their school or classroom based speaking just by assessing them orally. I do not see distinct positive effect on them.”

This happened as her students did not improve in their oral skills. Other teacher mentioned that the effectiveness of the assessment lies on the students’ outlook. If they put extra effort, the result can be seen. If not, they will remain in their current level as they are contented with their current state of skills.

Different teachers have different ways to teach and carry out the oral skills assessment. Two teachers use the scoring system to evaluate students. They use the scale 1 to 10 to evaluate students’ skills. The criteria that

they look into were the pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary usage (repetition and pauses), intonation, voice projection, and the flow of ideas, modulation and the tone of their language. As said by the second teacher,

“I usually base my evaluation on their speaking ability in the sense of their fluency, their vocabulary usage whether there is repetition, whether there is pauses and if they are able to add their own details which is not given in the oral speaking test.”

These as well as answers our first research question as the carrying out of this assessment is also one of the challenges faced by the teachers when they implement school-based oral English assessment. For the ways they carry out the assessment, one of the teacher used templates provided by the school, another teacher gave pictures and ask questions based on the pictures. The third teacher is more to the impromptu style as she gave impromptu speech as well as public speaking to evaluate them.

4.3 Challenges faced by teachers during the implantation of the oral assessment in liaise with SBA

Along this process of assessing students' speaking skills, teachers definitely faced many hurdles and challenges in order to carry out the assessment successfully. Students are basically terrified by the term 'test or assessment'. This could lead them to hide their true ability or potential of speaking. This situation was faced by the second teacher. She stated that;

“The major challenge that I have encountered while I am doing this assessment for my students is that they are not familiar and it creates a tension and they become very nervous. So, their true potential does not shown or portrayed during the assessment of what I know they are capable of. So this presents a challenge because what's seen in their papers is not their real ability. And why is it a challenge for me is because I know how well they are supposed to do but because it's an exam, it is stuck in their head that it is an exam, they become nervous and their performance is not as too far as I would like it to be.”

According to her, her students' true potentials have been hidden by their nervousness. This was bad as teachers know their students' true ability and they were in a position where they could not help. This also answers our first research question regarding the challenges that teachers faced when they implement school-based oral English assessment in school.

5.0 DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS

From the analysis of data obtained from the interviews with teachers, we can possibly say that school based oral English assessment was conducted efficiently in the school. Out of the three teachers, only one disagreed that school-based oral assessment is a success. All three of them understood the basic understanding of the term school-based assessment. It can be understood that school based assessments are very subjective as each teacher has different ways to conduct the assessment and have varied of results, resulting from the assessment. There were disagreements regarding the structure of the assessment as there are no proper guidelines or any specific standards.

It seemed like teachers have to go through heaps of workloads and paper works in order to carry out this assessment. The introduction of this new format of test or assessment proved to be new as Malaysian teachers were mostly exposed to the regular testing which were centralised by the Ministry of Education for a very long time. Although through the interview, we found out that two teachers mentioned that the assessment is successful and effective among the students, it still can be questionable of the credibility of the test itself.

To carry out school based assessment effectively, teachers would need to be exposed wholly to the structures and most of all, the objective of this assessment. This is to prepare the teachers to be able execute the school based oral assessment accordingly to the right way. This is to ensure that the teachers are clear first of the path, principle, the score rubric and the most important one is that teachers must be fair and neutral at all

times. One of the drawbacks of this type of assessment is that there could be rooms for biasness to occur. In order to prevent unfortunate incidents, government must prepare the basic and proper guidelines for all the teachers to follow. By doing this way, teachers would be able to conduct the oral assessment effectively. Educators, especially in primary schools should be equipped with the knowledge of the assessment as well as the subject of being assessed. The criteria and the components of which to be assessed must be known by the teachers who are involved in the oral assessment. To make this to happen or effectively implement, the Ministry of Education plays a big role. The initiative to organise a seminar in order to expose teachers regarding school-based oral assessment must be carried out by the body. Finally, the in-depth knowledge of school-based oral assessment in teachers would make SBA as an effective method to assess students' speaking skills. There must be cooperation among teachers and the English Head of Panel to improve the process of the implementation of this assessment.

6.0 CONCLUSION

This paper highlights on teachers' perspectives on school-based oral English assessment in an international primary school in Malaysia. It can be said that school based oral English assessment is efficient among the students. The teachers had agreed fully, some partially agreed and even another teacher was not fully satisfied with the assessment. Out of three teachers, two teachers had agreed that school based oral assessment do benefit the students in several aspects. Firstly, students able to speak out and answer accordingly to the question posed by the teacher. Despite all the challenges faced by the teacher in order to make the students to speak, school based oral English assessment do produce some positive effects on students. Since there are no specific rubrics given to the teachers to carry out the assessment, the teacher themselves came out with their own materials and teaching method to prepare students for the assessment. Second, there was a teacher who feels that oral English assessment does not cover the speaking skill fully. Not only that, the teacher had to approach the students and prompt them to speak without the fear. Those emotional phases like nervousness and fear of assessment faced by the students are challenges that the teachers need to tackle in order to carry out the assessment successfully. Teachers know the student's capability in English language but due to the fear of failing an assessment, the students could not give full cooperation in oral assessment.. When the students face difficulties to speak out, the teacher need to make them speak forcefully and it can be discouraging for the students as well. Therefore, to encourage the students to be involved in oral assessment effectively, the Ministry of Education has to prepare proper score rubrics and materials for the teachers to carry out oral skill assessment successfully. Oral skill assessment is very important as it helps the students to speak out the language confidently.

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