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Research paper

Juxtaposing the Primary School Assessment Concepts and Practices in Singapore and Malaysia

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Abstract

The assessment practices in schools have moved from the traditional way of assessing students, which is too exam oriented and relies heavily on standardized exams, towards a more holistic assessment which involves the integration of Central Assessment and School-based Assessment. This paper aims to review the relevant studies on Central Assessment, School-Based Assessment, Formative Assessment (FA) and Assessment for Learning (AfL) in Singapore and Malaysia. It begins with a brief history of assessment in Malaysia and Singapore. Then, it critically reviews the concepts of Formative Assessment and Assessment for Learning as practiced in both countries. From the review, some differences and challenges between the two educational systems particularly with regard to the implementation of classroom assessment are identified. These differences include the medium of instruction, the assessment system and the average class size. Despite the challenges, School-based Assessment, Formative Assessment and Assessment for Learning should be duly implemented regardless of the increased workload and the level of the teachers' skills in assessment. It is found that these factors do not adversely affect the practices of Formative Assessment and Assessment for Learning by the teachers.

Keywords: *Central Assessment; School-Based Assessment; Formative Assessment; Assessment for Learning)*

1. Introduction

Assessment practices in Malaysian primary schools have undergone many changes since the independence from the British colonials in 1957. The importance of the English language learning and assessment were also changed more than once, affected by the local identity building and global education trends. The English schools established around 1957 had produced fluent English language speakers among all the levels of the socio-economic background. However, after the abolishment of the English schools, some of the later generations in Malaysia seem to have neglected the importance of the English language (1–4). On the contrary, the English language proficiency of the Singaporeans were still competent based on their students' results in international assessments. Hence, the objective of this paper is to compare the assessment concepts and practices of the assessment in primary schools in Singapore and Malaysia. The purpose is to identify the differences and the challenges in the implementation of the assessment concepts and practices in the primary schools in both countries. The following subsections discusses on the brief historical background of assessment concepts and practices in Malaysia and Singapore.

1.1. Assessment in Malaysia

The British colonials had influenced the education system by bringing books and references in the English language (5,6). The first recorded examination in the primary schools was the MSSEE, or the Malayan Secondary School Entrance Exam. This examination was administered in the English language, hence the mastery of English as the medium of instruction in all subjects was very important until its abolishment in 1963. The MSSEE was replaced with PDL or Penilaian Darjah Lima. All the national examinations in the primary schools were in Bahasa Melayu beginning from 1967, except for the English language paper. Unfortunately, the English language results in the current UPSR (Primary School Achievement Test) consequenced in a gap of the English as a Second/Foreign Language proficiency among students with different socio-economic background.

In 2003, the Malaysian students who participated in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) organised by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement were unable to attain the expected results. At that time, Mathematics and Science were taught in Bahasa Melayu. As an initiative, the MoE Malaysia implemented the Teaching and Learning of Science and Mathematics in English (ETeMS) beginning from 2003. Even the UPSR was administered with the instructions and the items in dual language between 2003 until 2011. By 2011, ETeMS was abolished due to the language challenges faced by the schools and the teachers (7).

There were also changes in the assessment system whereby the School-Based Oral Assessment (SBOA) for Bahasa Melayu and English language subjects was introduced in schools as formative assessment (7). The School-Based Oral Assessment policy required the teachers to conduct speaking tests formatively. External examiners were appointed to ensure the validity and the reliability of the School-Based Oral Assessment. Even though it was reported that the teachers lacked readiness in practising School-Based Oral Assessment (8), later, it was recognised as an inspiration to the implementation of School-Based Assessment (SBA) in 2011 (9).

The concepts of Formative Assessment and Assessment *for* Learning were included as a part of School-Based Assessment. Higher Order Thinking Skills were also incorporated in the curriculum. The Dual Language Program classes were piloted in selected

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schools, whereby beginning from Year 1, pupils were immersed in the English language as the medium of instruction and assessment of Mathematics and Sciences subjects. There was no obligation for schools to open Dual Language Program classes in schools, but once it was started, the should be no backing out.
By 2015, Malaysia had managed to achieve a higher rank in the TIMMS results, with partial credits to the implementation of School-Based Assessment. It proved that the Higher Order Thinking Skills, Dual Language Program, Formative Assessment and Assessment *for* Learning in the pedagogy, curriculum and assessment had helped to produce competent students.
However, the teach-to-the test practices were still inevitable, leading to the revamp of the Primary School Achievement Test (UPSR) 2016 by administering at least 20% Higher Order Thinking Skills questions in all the subjects. A more holistic approach to the Primary School Achievement Test (UPSR) also included reports on the candidates' physical activities, sports & co-curricular activities, and psychometric keenness (10). Even cross curricular elements were emphasized, for instance, entrepreneurship and Information Communication and Technology literacy across all the subjects (10). These were some of the initiatives by the MoE Malaysia in transforming the educational assessment system in primary schools.

1.2. Assessment in Singapore

The Common Standard VI Entrance Examination began in 1952 in primary schools. It was changed into the Secondary School Entrance Examination, and later administered as the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) (11). The Primary School Leaving Examination uses English language as a medium of instruction for all the subjects, except for first language examinations, in Chinese, Malay, Tamil, Panjabi, Hindi, Gujarati and Urdu language examinations (11). The compulsory pass policy had made the primary education in Singapore very examination-oriented (12).
Nevertheless, the MoE Singapore had introduced the Primary Education Review and Implementation for Holistic Assessment (PERI-HA) while consistently having research and development in their version of the School-Based Assessment. In 1997, primary schools had 40% of the final grade based on Integrated Project Work, based on School-Based Assessment (13). Fast forward to 2015, the Primary Education Review and Implementation for Holistic Assessment (PERI-HA) required the teachers in the Primary 1 and Primary 2 classes to administer bite-sized assessments with more qualitative feedback for improvement (12).
At the same time, MoE Singapore administers the Primary School Leaving Examination. Apparently, the merit-based and the examination-oriented education along with the compulsory pass in the standard examinations have consistently produced competent students. Singapore had ranked first place in TIMSS 2015 (Malaysia, 2016).
The brief history on assessment in Singapore and Malaysia presented that both countries had administered Central Assessments in primary schools known as PSLE and UPSR. Currently, both countries are moving towards implementing School-Based Assessment in the primary schools. Hence, the assessment concepts regarding School-Based Assessment are the focus of the discussion in this paper. The following definitions spot on a part of the School-Based Assessment in both countries, which are Formative Assessment (FA) and Assessment *for* Learning (A*f*L).

2. School-Based Assessment, Formative Assessment and Assessment *for* Learning

In the literature, Formative Assessment and Assessment *for* Learning were always a part of School-Based Assessment with the function and the purpose of classroom assessment. School-Based Assessment refers to the assessments in schools, whether made by the teachers or administered by the teachers. The move from the attention to Central Assessment towards more School-Based Assessment policy in education had been described as the assessment reform in education worldwide (14).
The importance of Formative Assessment was recognized by (15) and many other researchers long before (15) reviewed the benefits of Assessment *for* Learning. These are all a part of pedagogy, curriculum and assessment. In fact, the seminal paper by (16)portrayed the experimental study by (15) the Malaysian primary school context on the effects of giving Cue plus the Participation of students on the end examination results. Although the article was not on assessment, the giving Cue approach did resemble the Feedback strategy from the Assessment *for* Learning concept.
Among the definitions of assessment were: to set the criteria, the weightings and the goals of a test/evaluation (15); to assess students' previous knowledge to activate their learning capacity (17); and to justify the judgement against the stated goals and criteria (18).
Narrowing the definition down to Formative Assessment, all activities undertaken by teachers and students in the form of feedbacks that could support teaching and learning were considered as Formative Assessment (16). Later, Broadfoot et al. (16)defined Assessment *for* Learning as "the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by the learners and the teachers, to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there".
These definitions were far from easy in the implementation of Formative Assessment and Assessment *for* Learning, and it was deemed as a challenging task to balance the assessment and the pedagogy (19), especially in an examination-oriented culture. Despite the guiding 10 principles of Assessment *for* Learning (20) and the more detailed definition of Assessment *for* Learning by (20) , the real implementation remained as a challenge to the teachers in a real classroom. Assessing students day by day and minute by minute would definitely not be an easy task for the teachers (21).
To date, one of the most comprehensive instrument to audit the implementation of Assessment *for* Learning had been constructed by (22,23). The Assessment *for* Learning Audit Instrument examined the teachers' practices based on the Key Strategies of Assessment *for* Learning: Sharing Learning Intentions and Success Criteria, Questions and Classroom Discussions, FeedBacks and Peer- and Self-Assessment. Most research on the implementation of Assessment *for* Learning were based on self reports, hence a gap was found whereby the real classroom interactions regarding Assessment *for* Learning were scarce (24).

3. Some Similarities

Many studies on the implementation of Formative Assessment and Assessment *for* Learning were reported via self reports, and rarely provided rich data (24). The same issue was found in the previous studies on School-Based Assessment in Singapore and Malaysia. Apart from this issue, there were also comparative studies such as the discussion by Birenbaum et al. (24). on the implementation of Assessment for Learning in seven countries. This comparison of the trending Formative Assessment and Assessment *for* Learning in different countries could provide an insight into the issues in the real implementation. Hence, this paper attempts to replicate the previous studies by focusing on Singapore and Malaysia. There might not be authentic data yet in this discussion, but it would be a gap for future studies.

3.1. Singapore

In Singapore, Formative Assessment and Assessment *for* Learning was required in classrooms since 2010 (MoE Singapore, 2016). They were piloted between 2006 – 2008 at 70 out of 182 primary schools. The syllabus in Singapore is comprehensive of both pri-

mary and secondary levels, for express and normal classes. In the syllabus, Assessment *for* Learning was included in the Teaching Processes within the curriculum framework. The medium of instruction was purely in the English language and the average number of students per class was 37.4. Ethnic languages were tested but they were not used as the medium of instruction in the other subjects.

Ratnam-Lim & Tan (2015) did not deny the continuing domination of teach-to-the-test culture despite after the Primary Education Review and Implementation for Holistic Assessment (PERI-HA) review. The holistic education in the PERI-HA excluded summative assessments from Primary 1 and Primary 2 classes. Unfortunately, this had resulted in more workload for the teachers. The examination meritocracy in Singapore somehow affected the implementation of Assessment *for* Learning (12). Overall, the findings showed that the concept of assessment in primary schools began to change towards School-Based Assessment in Primary 1 and 2.

However, instead of removing the anticipation of passing compulsory tests, the teachers were burdened with the administration of bite-sized assessments in classrooms. Ironically, the on-going formative assessments were of very high concerns to some parents and they did not cease the teach-to-the-test culture in Primary 1 and 2. The responses varied: some teachers were accepting the changes in the Primary assessment and some were criticising them. (12) also found that some of the primary school teachers still adhered to the teach-to-the-test culture via drills and practices, despite the new policy on Holistic Assessment. In fact, when the education system emphasized on extra curricular activities, the parents enrolled their children into more tuitions to compete in the new system. This was an evidence of the effects from the compulsory pass in the education system. The children had to pass the examinations and the evaluations to proceed to the next stage in education. Better still, the community and the stakeholders were very concerned about the end-results in the examinations. The situation in Singapore was not much different from the neighbouring country, Malaysia.

3.2. Malaysia

As introduced, the medium of instruction in the national public schools were mainly in Bahasa Melayu. All the subjects were taught in Bahasa Melayu except for the first languages at national and national type schools. At times, even the English language subject was taught using Bahasa Melayu, especially for the starters among the learners of English as a Second Language (26). This was a scaffolding strategy to motivate students to learn.

The total student enrolment can be between a range of 26 to 45 children per classroom (MoE Malaysia, 2016). Currently, beginning from August 2016, the MoE Malaysia is adapting the Common European Frame of Reference (CEFR) scales to realign the English language education with global needs. The CEFR is already used worldwide in education systems around the world since 2012.

In Malaysia, two selected studies reported on the implementation of Assessment *for* Learning. One was a qualitative study by (28).. The rich data were framed within the sociocultural perspective of Assessment *for* Learning, or more specifically, the Zone of Proximal Development. Apparently, the Assessment *for* Learning term had been defined in the introductory part of the curriculum framework since 2011 in accordance with the implementation of School-Based Assessment. Even so, (28).detected a minimal use of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) questions in Year 1 and Year 2 classrooms.

Apart from the Higher Order Thinking Skills strategy, the other Assessment *for* Learning strategies in Sardareh's (2014) findings were thematized as collaboration, roles in the classroom, authenticity, reflection, active learning, scaffolding, and feedback. These were thematized according to the Zone of Proximal Development by Vygotsky (1930-1934/1978). Each theme was discussed as crucial to promote learning among students, and this was in line with the Assessment *for* Learning purpose.

In the second selected study, (28).had administered an Assessment *for* Learning Questionnaire survey on primary school teachers. Sadly, many teachers admitted to have either Basic or Unsatisfactory level of practice (30). Nevertheless, teachers did use Assessment *for* Learning to affect students' motivation and self esteem, to guide their pedagogy, to provide feedbacks, to inculcate self-regulated learning, and to encourage self-assessment among the students. These School-Based Assessment concepts were also found as beneficial by the teachers in primary schools (28). The only problem was the increased workload for the teachers and the students (28).

As discussed, the concept of assessment in Malaysian primary schools were also moving towards School-Based Assessment, similar to the situation in Singapore. It was not easy to change the teachers' paradigm from the teach-to-the-test culture towards balancing the implementation of Formative Assessment and Assessment *for* Learning in School-Based Assessment. The introduction of Assessment *for* Learning and School-Based Assessment had moved the teachers as the implementors into a number of challenges in the classroom.

To sum up, the studies on the implementation of Formative Assessment and Assessment *for* Learning in Singapore and Malaysia showed that there were a number of differences and challenges faced by the teachers. The differences were coded as the medium of instruction, the assessment practices and the class size, while the challenges included the workload and the level of the teachers' Formative Assessment and Assessment *for* Learning practices.

4. The Differences and the Challenges

4.1. The Differences

The differences between the education in Singapore and Malaysia were found in three aspects; the medium of instruction, the assessment practices and the class size. The medium of instruction in Singapore is mostly in the English language, but in Malaysia, it is mostly in the mother tongue. The medium of instruction could have affected the culture of the classroom in some ways.

The assessment practices were also different as the Singaporean teachers were required to give more qualitative feedbacks to students. On the other hand, the Malaysian primary schools went through the tick-box syndrome, similar to the experience in some other countries (24,31). Instead of giving fully qualitative feedbacks only, the Malaysian teachers were obliged to prepare the quantitative oriented School-Based Assessment result slips for students.

Another difference was the class size. The Singaporean schools were not as crowded as the average Malaysian classroom. Hence it was assumed that the MoE Singapore had more leverage when the new policy was implemented.

4.1. The Challenges

Meanwhile, the challenges in the implementation of School-Based Assessment, Formative Assessment and Assessment *for* Learning were almost similar in both countries. The most challenging parts were the workload and the teachers' skills. The teachers from both countries mentioned that the implementation of School-Based Assessment, Formative Assessment and Assessment *for* Learning required more workload than before.

For instance, the bite-sized assessment were supposed to lessen the anxiety of the young learners by not having a one-off examination at the end of the year. Unfortunately, each bite-sized assessment had increased the competition among the students and the parents, hence they became small summative tests instead (12). The teachers had to construct more test items for the bite-sized assessment, plus they had to mark and give qualitative feedbacks.

The students needed more support from teachers and also from parents to excel in the bite-sized assessments in Singapore (12).
In Malaysia, the teachers claimed that they had to do extra work by surfing the internet and search for more resources to implement the School-Based Assessment in the classrooms (28). The issue on teacher workload had been taken into consideration in the Malaysia Education Blueprint whereby some teachers worked to the extent of 77 hours per week, approximately 15 hours per day. Unfortunately, only between 2.4 to 2.9 hours were allocated to classroom sessions. The average contact hour for the implementation of Assessment *for* Learning may need to be revised based on the number of students in a classroom.
Another challenge was the teachers' skills in the implementation of Formative Assessment and Assessment *for* Learning. Based on the previous studies, the teachers were unable to implement the best practices in Assessment *for* Learning (30). Moreover, they did not use sufficient Higher Order Thinking Skills questions in the classrooms of Year 1 and Year 2 (9). The implementation of Assessment *for* Learning in the classrooms were deemed as less important compared to the end results in the Summative Assessment. This still happened despite the previous attempt to document the best practices of English language teachers in School-Based Assessment (32).
From another side, the Singaporean teachers were stated as being less able to provide competent and comprehensible feedbacks for the young learners. Au contraire, some competent teachers expressed their dissapppointment on the time taken for writing the qualitative feedbacks on students' work that were underrated due to the anxiety over the overall examination results (12). The following table displays the differences and the challenges of the implementation of Formative Assessment and Assessment *for* Learning in Singapore and Malaysia.

Table 1: The differences and the challenges of the implementation of Formative Assessment and Assessment *for* Learning in Singapore and Malaysia

Countries	Singapore	Malaysia
Differences		
Medium of instruction	English language for all subjects except for Chinese, Malay, Tamil, Panjabi, Hindi, Gujarati, Bengali & Urdu.	Malay language for all the subjects; or dual language for the English language papers; and Dual Language Program (DLP) for selected classes.
Assessment practices	Primary Education Review and Implementation for Holistic Assessment (PERI-HA): qualitative feedbacks and bite-sized assessment for Primary 1 and 2; Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) at the end of primary schooling.	Teachers implement Assessment *for* Learning, Assessment of Learning, Formative Assessment and Summative Assessment as a part of School-Based Assessment; UPSR as the most important examination at the primary schools.
Class size	37.4 pupils per class.	26 pupils per class.
Challenges		
Workload	Both teachers and students face increased workload.	Teachers overwhelmed with the workload in School-Based Assessment.
The level of the teachers' Formative Assessment and Assessment *for* Learning practices	Needed skills to provide constructive feedback and to minimize the tendency to drill students for examinations.	Still low; examination oriented.

This table exhibits the differences and the challenges in the implementation of assessment concepts in Singapore and Malaysia. By far, the differences in the medium of instruction did not affect the assessment practices although both countries performed differently in international examinations. In Singapore, teachers were required to give written qualitative feedbacks but the Malaysian teachers were given more empowerment by being able to choose the most suitable feedbacks for their pupils. Although it seemed that the class size is bigger in Singapore, Assessment *for* Learning was still implemented at a large scale. The average number of students in the Malaysian classroom was 26, however there was an imbalance between large and small schools whereby the biggest number of students per class could reach up to 45. Almost all the participants in the compared studies reached a decree of agreement in the assessment practices and the workload. Working from this table, some conclusions were made in the following section.

5. Conclusion

This paper has highlighted a number of points regarding the implementation of Assessment *for* Learning for the young learners in Singapore and Malaysia. Among the salient points that could be made from this investigation are:

1. School-Based Assessment, Assessment for Learning, and Formative Assessment have been promoted in the curriculum in both countries as a method to reduce the practice of teaching-to-the-test and to inculcate self-regulated learning among students as a complement to UPSR and PSLE, the summative assessments in Malaysian and Singaporean primary schools.
2. The implementation of School-Based Assessment, Formative Assessment and Assessment for Learning is ongoing in both countries despite the differences in the medium of instruction and the average class size.
3. The mutual challenges faced in the implementation of School-Based Assessment, Formative Assessment and Assessment for Learning include the increased workload and the level of the teachers' assessment practices in the classroom.

It is not easy to change the paradigm and the shared factors that affected the implementation of School-Based Assessment, Assessment *for* Learning and Formative Assessment in Singapore and Malaysia. The medium of instruction, the assessment practices and the average class size could be the determining factors. The differences in these factors could affect the intended results of the School-Based Assessment practices. The challenges in the implementation of School-Based Assessment, Formative Assessment, and Assessment *for* Learning which were shared included the extra workload, the teachers' conceptions, skills, attitude and understanding of the policy's intent. It should be noted that these findings were mostly based on the teachers' self reports. More studies are needed to investigate the implementation of School-Based Assessment, Formative Assessment, and Assessment *for* Learning.
To recap, both the traditional assessment and the assessment reforms are inseparable in the education system. It is up to the policy makers and the implementors to adapt the best guidelines and choose the best practices for the young learners. From a point of view, the teachers themselves need to become lifelong learners and seek the best assessment practices because they are the ones who deals with the young learners in the classrooms.

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