

Alternative Assessment: Teacher Readiness and Parents' Involvement in Enhancing Teaching and Learning of Malay Language – A Case Study in Primary School in Singapore

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ABSTRACTS

Singapore has an educational system that promotes the learning of Mother Tongue language and English language in schools. Many changes have taken place in our educational system and one of which is the promotion of alternative assessment in assessing pupils' development. This is done to provide a more holistic assessment and continuous feedback of pupils' learning and progress to pupils themselves and their parents. This paper describes the findings from a case study conducted in a primary school in Singapore. The findings highlighted three perspectives from pupils, teachers and parents. This paper also tackles the important questions: What are the perception of parents, pupils and teachers on alternative assessment for primary 1 and 2? What actually happened in a typical Malay language classroom when alternative assessment is implemented? What are the views of parents, teachers and pupils when alternative assessment is conducted in classroom? What are their experiences like? This is a descriptive research reporting on the data collated from surveys and interviews conducted for pupils, parents and teachers. Dialogue sessions were also conducted to further gather data on alternative assessment. Findings from the data collated shows that alternative assessment enhance pupils' knowledge and skills in using Malay language. The findings also show that continuous improvement need to be carried out by teachers and schools to ensure pupils and parents reap the maximum benefits from the implementation of alternative assessment in school.

Key words

Alternative Assessment, Formative, Summative, Rubrics, Show and Tell

INTRODUCTION

Singapore has an educational system that promotes the learning of Mother Tongue languages (MTL) and English language in schools. Malay language (ML) is one of the compulsory languages that need to be taught in schools within normal curriculum time. Many changes have taken place in our educational system and one of these changes is the use of alternative assessment in assessing pupils' development. Singapore has undergone several milestones in her journey in education. 'Thinking School, Learning Nation'(1996), 'Teach Less Learn More' (2004), Mother Tongue Review (2005) and PERI (2009) are some of the major milestones that Singapore has gone through to remain relevant and dynamic in the changing world situations. In 2010, another major review was conducted for the MTL curriculum. Several recommendations were put forward to further enhance and improve the teaching and

lesser emphasis on summative assessment for pupils in the level and more formative assessment will be introduced to assess pupils' progress in learning. In a nutshell, the main reason of this research is to gather data and information on:

Alternatif Assessment: Teacher Readiness and Parents' Involvement in Enhancing Learning of Malay language.

Research Questions:

1. What are the respondents' perceptions on the implementation of alternative assessment for ML at P1 and P2 level?
2. What actually happen in typical ML lesson for primary 1 and 2 pupils when alternative assessment is implemented?
3. What are the views of teachers, parents and pupils on alternative assessment and their experiences in infusing alternative assessment in classroom?

LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH

This research is conducted in a typical neighbourhood school and gathered the views of ML teachers teaching in a primary school. Views shared by teachers are their personal views related to alternative assessment. Feedback form was also given to all 10 teachers who were involved in the research who taught ML at primary school. 100% of teachers involved in this research.

Out of 217 pupils who are in primary 1 and 2, 100 survey forms were issued to parents (50 survey forms for each level). 94 parents responded to the survey forms.

In primary 1 and 2, there are all together 8 classess in the school. Monitoring of classes on alternative assessment was conducted in two classes, one from each level. 4 pupils who went through the alternative assessment and carried out the show and tell activity in class were selected for a dialogue session with teachers. Teachers collated pupils' views in the dialogue session.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Koh Kim Hong, Gong Wengao and Lye Mun Sum (2008) said that Singapore has a good dual language policy. However, he felt that the realization of the policy is hindered by too much stress on factual and knowledge reproduction. From 92 activities that were gathered, 76.4% of activities require pupils to have discrete knowledge, 18.3% require pupils to complete MCQ questions and 5.3% require pupils to have the knowledge to write stories. The data collated shows that majority of teachers preferred teaching approaches that requires pupils to do drill and practice so as to ensure pupils acquire the knowledge taught and basic skills. Unfortunately, the knowledge and basic skills taught were not directed to pupils' prior knowledge and communication purposes.

Kelvin Tan (2007), recognized that the traditional modes of assessment had served Singapore well in past. However, recent enhancement in the pedagogical aspects of teaching and learning around the world and the changing profiles of learners that are progressive, require deep thinking and insights in the way we assess pupils' learning. We realize that assessment of pupils learning and development become complex and challenging. Two important questions always rose pertaining to alternative assessment:

1. Will alternative assessment result to better way of learning?
2. How can alternative assessment bring about positive change in pupils' learning?

Kelvin also stresses that in order to improve the quality of assessment, it is pertinent for teachers to determine the type of learning experiences that pupils will go through in order to achieve the intended results. It is also important to look at the appropriate measurement tools to measure what is deemed as important to the pupils' learning. Teaching and learning are interrelated and influencing one another. Without assessment, teachers would not know whether learning has taken place. Without teaching, teachers would not know what to assess.

According to Black and William (1998), learning and teaching process is interactive in nature. On one hand, assessment is conducted to enable teachers to know and understand the development as well as problems faced by pupils in their learning process. On the other, teachers can do something to help solve the problems faced by pupils to meet their learning needs. Teachers can play proactive role to ensure learning take place in the classroom.

Shepard's (2000) highlighted the issue of reformation in curriculum vision. He concluded that in curriculum, the focus is on pupils' learning needs and not so much on pupils' inclination towards tests/examinations, or curriculum that is guided by grades, A, B etc. Therefore, it is important to ensure that pupils are holistically prepared to face the real world and not subjected to their classroom environment per se. Shepard correctly pointed out that the current curriculum, theories of learning and assessment show that there was a minimal alignment between learning and assessment as there is a misalignment between what is taught and the way we assess pupils' learning.

The purpose of teaching is to bring about effective learning. Systematic assessment is a process in teaching and learning to help pupils to achieve excellence in life. Every child should be given the chance and skills to plan their own learning. The ability to plan own learning is an important process that will cultivate the love for learning and desire for long life learning among pupils.

Alternative assessment can be carried out in various ways and forms. For example, the observation can be conducted for a group of pupils who are discussing about certain topic with his friends in a group. From the observations, teachers can identify pupils who have not grasp concepts taught in the class. Teachers must be ready to reteach so that pupils understand the concept taught. Teachers must be willing to change the way they always taught and employ teaching and assessment strategies that are more variety and extensive in nature.

BACKGROUND OF SCHOOL A

School A has gradually shifted from having formal and summative assessments to alternative and formative assessments for the primary 1 and 2 levels. Since 2008, the school has removed the formal Continual Assessment 1 and 2 and Semestral Assessment 1 and 2 at primary 1. In 2010, no formal assessment or examination was conducted for primary 2. Eventhough there is no formal assessment conducted for the levels, pupils were still given some form of percentages score for English language, Mathematics and ML to show pupils performance and progression in learning. To replace the formal and writing components in Semestral Assessment, teachers were given the autonomy to assess pupils' learning including assessing student formatively.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data for the findings were gathered through the quantitative and qualitative means. Those data or information ware obtained from surveys, interviews and dialogues and lesson observations. Three main research instruments were used in this research namely:

1. Survey forms
2. Interviews
3. Observations

Interview is one of the methods to obtain information directly from subjects. Interviews that were conducted were known as 'semi structured' dialogues sessions. Pupils were asked series of intended questions and as for the rest, teachers were expected to be able to adapt according to the needs arises in the lesson. This was done so that teachers can illicit more questions to check further of pupils' understanding during lessons.

Observation is the third instrument use in ML classroom. From the observations made, teachers could analyse pupils' behaviours based on certain situations. The researcher did not ask question during lesson implementation stage. Pupils were allowed to carry out their learning without any interferences or disturbance from the researcher.

Sample of questions asked to ML teachers:

- How do your pupils become more interested in learning?
- What are the challenges you faced when you need to further enhance your teaching?
- If there are things you can change in the teaching and learning of ML at primary 1 and 2, what are the things that you wish to change?

Samples of questions asked for parents:

- As parents, what are the challenges you faced in trying to help your child in his/her learning of ML as a subject?
- How can the school help your child in learning Malay language effectively?

Monitoring of Classroom

The researcher monitored closely a class each in primary 1 and 2. During the observations, ML teachers employed 'show and tell' teaching strategy. The lessons observed were video recorded. The video recording is to assist the researcher to analyse in greater details what really took place during lessons. Researcher can view the video clips more than once so that she can have clearer sense of what the pupils were doing in class. Pupils' behaviors and expressions were observed.

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

The followings are the stages or procedures of the research study.

| | |
|-------------|---|
| Week 1-4: | Preparation for the research |
| Week 5: | Dessimation of survey forms to teachers |
| Week 6: | Monitoring of Classes for Primary 1 and 2, and interviews of pupils |
| Week 7: | Dessimation of survey forms to parents |
| Week 8 & 9: | Interview of parents and teachers |
| Week 10-12: | Preparation of report |

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Findings: Teachers

Data gathered are divided into three sections. There are:

1. Teachers' views and opinions after conducting formative assessments to primary 1 and 2 pupils;
2. Data collated from surveys administered to teachers, parents and pupils; and
3. Interviews of parents, pupils and teachers.

The findings from the 10 questions administered will be discussed in greater details. The mean for all the 10 questions is 76%.

90% of teachers agreed that the use of formative or alternative assessment modes can measure the achievement of teaching objectives or learning outcomes. Teachers found that they are more focus and clear on the importance of learning objective as teachers realize and aware that the objectives are closely related to the assessments set. When teachers planned assessment activities, they would always refer back to the objectives of the lessons and the assessments tasks set sought to

measure what were being taught and whether they met the intended learning outcomes or objectives.

90% of teachers felt that formative assessment or alternative assessment encouraged pupils to be actively engaged in lessons. The data shows that pupils were more motivated to learn when teachers employed alternative assessment in lessons and hence the pupils tend to be more engaged in class during lessons.

One of the questions asked to the teachers was if they were ready to implement alternative assessment in their lessons. 70% of teachers responded confidently that they were ready and willing infused means and modes on alternative assessment in their lessons. Teachers were also eager to learn and implement new strategies in assessment to enhance teaching and learning of pupils.

Teachers highlighted two challenges faces by them in impletenting the alternative assessment: Time and skills that are equired.

Time

At primary 1, the total number of periods given for the learning of ML is 13 periods or 6hours 30minutes every week. Everyday, teachers will meet their pupils at least for 1hour or 1hour 30minutes. At primary 2, 11 periods are allocated or 5hours 30minutes for the teaching and learning of ML every week. In every ML lesson, there are at least 30 pupils in each class. Hence, teachers need more time to prepare and conduct alternative or formative assessments during lessons.

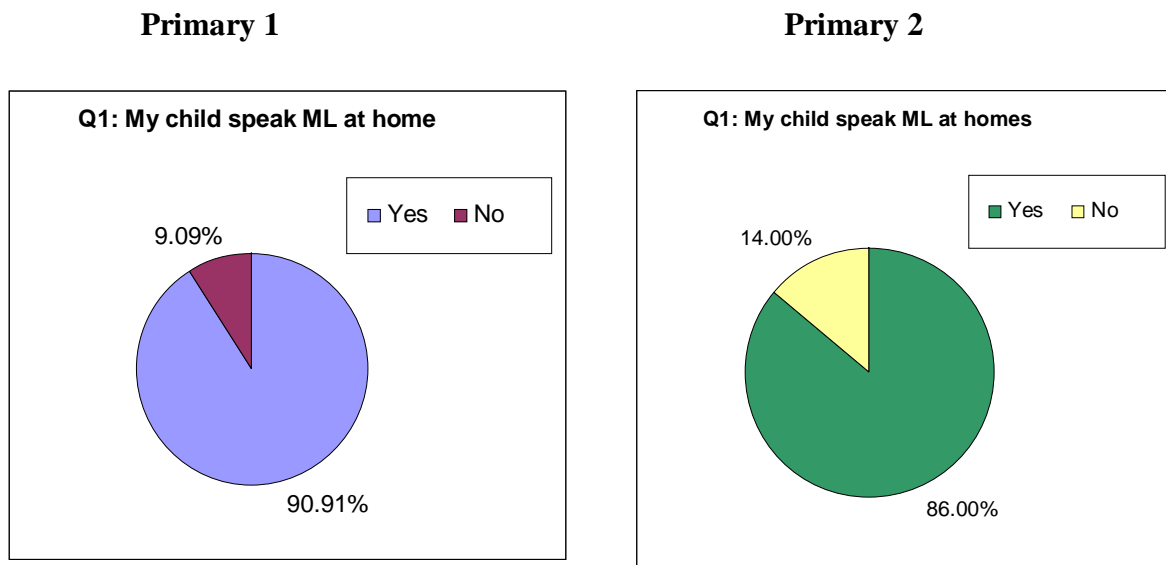
One solution to this problem is to review and relook at the way teachers teach ML. Teachers could do away with lessons or topics that do not add value to learning. For example, teacher can integrate the lesson on vocabulary with lesson on oral communication.

Skills Required

ML teachers are trained to use tradisional methods to assess pupils' learning. The concepts of alternative or formative assessment are new to them. To ensure effective implementation of alternative assessment in classroom, teachers need to be prepared and guided to successfully adopt and implement teh formative and alternative assessments. Teachers need to be exposed to the various aspects of assessments so that they are able to teach and guide their pupils better.

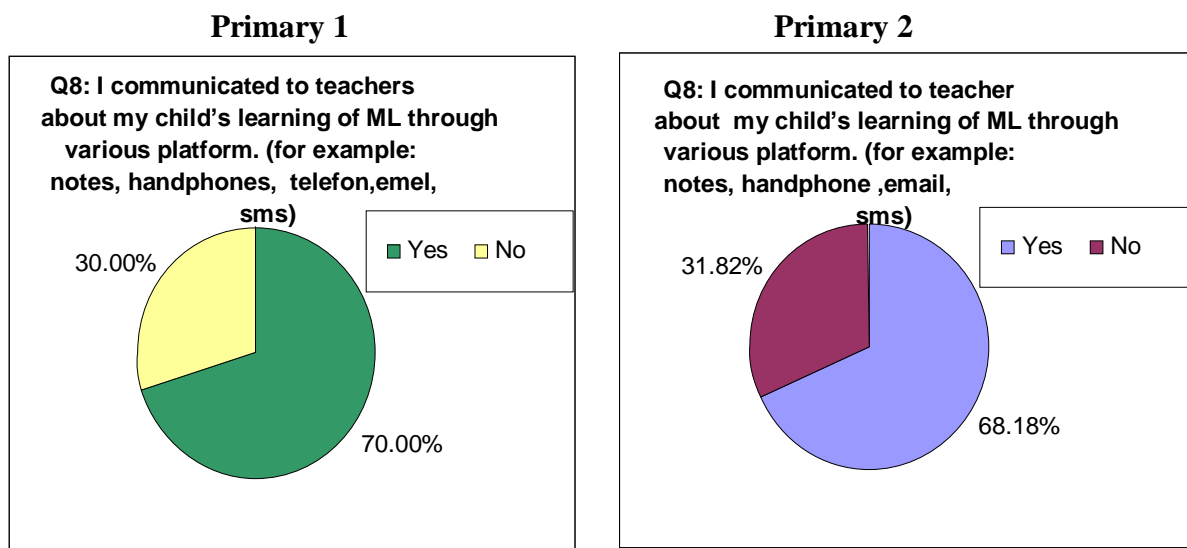
Findings: Parents

Figure 2: Percentage of pupils who speak in Malay language at home



The data shows there was a different in percentages with regards to parents' responses to the survey question for primary 1 and 2. For primary 1, 100% of parents agreed that their children love to learn ML. At primary 2, the percentage went down to 94% of pupils who said that they like to learn ML. This happened due to perhaps the subject or their examination papers are getting more challenging at primary 2. At primary 1, 91% of pupils reported that they speak ML at homes while at primary 2 only 86% of pupils speak ML at home.

Figure 3: Percentage of parents who communicated in ML Teachers to improve their children's learning



In terms of parents' communication with teachers, 68% of parents of primary 1 pupils communicated to teachers about their child learning compared to 70% of parents of primary 2 pupils. This percentage is a concern because lack of communication between parents and teachers means that parents would not have feedback on their children's progress in learning. Secondly, many parents agreed that their child will face less pressure in learning if no formal examination or assessment is conducted at primary 1 and 2. However, parents still require more feedback and clarifications from teachers about their child performance in the subject in classroom learning. In summary, if there is no formal assessment to be conducted for their children, parents are worried about the lack of communication between them and teachers as well as the lack of information with regards to their child's performance in class.

Knowledge on Assessment

Parents' knowledge in education may be limited to the experiences that they went through during schooling or through their readings in the media reports. This information is not adequate taking into consideration the many changes that had taken place in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in schools.

Communication

From the data collated, majority of parents found that there was a minimum interaction and communication between them and teachers. Only 68% of primary 1 parent and 70% of primary 2 parents communicated with teachers. With the lack of communication between parents and teachers, parents would not know what the objectives of initiatives introduced by schools. Good communications between parents and teachers are pertinent to children's success in their learning.

Findings: Pupils

Teachers were told to conduct their normal lesson as usual when observations were conducted. Teachers were suggested to conduct 'show and tell' activity during lessons. On a whole, it was found that there was a good rapport and relationship between teachers and pupils in class. Pupils generally understood their activities and understood their teachers' expectation in terms of learning tasks to be completed.

At primary 1, teachers provided more guidance and help for pupils to carry out the class activities. This was done as teachers found that there were pupils who need more guidance from teachers than others. In this respect, teachers conducted differentiated instruction. Pupils at primary 2 were more confident as they had gone through the similar activities since they were at primary 1. Pupils were also given sufficient time to complete their learning tasks. On a whole, pupils found learning interesting and fun. They were engaged throughout the lessons observed.

CONCLUSION

From the data and information collated, the awareness on alternative assessment is relatively new in Singapore educational system. To a certain extent, only some

aspects of formative or alternative assessments are clear to teachers. There are many aspects of assessment of learning that teachers still unsure of. Some teachers were not sure of the procedures in implementing formative assessment in class. Teachers were of the view that it would be helpful if the teaching resources including assessment resources for primary 1 and 2 were provided for them or they were jointly developed by them so that they could help one another. By doing so, they could develop their capacity in resource development. Teachers can then share their resources to facilitate good teaching and learning among their peers.

Support from the School and Ministry of Education

All teachers agreed on the importance to implement alternative and formative assessments for pupils. Teachers hope that they will get close guidance from the school management and the Ministry of Education, in particular from the relevant departments that handle the teaching and learning of ML. It would be better if teachers to be guided with structured courses on assessment to support them for effective implementation of formative assessment. They hoped that the experts support be provided for them so as to ensure smooth implementation in school.

Communication with Parents

When implementing formative or alternative assessment, it is very important to communicate to parents and pupils so that they understand the message and feedback that teachers want to convey to them. More could be done to enhance the quality of interations and information dissemination to parents. More informal meetings could be organized to improve the quality of communications between parents and teachers via various modes of communication including the use of new media such as emails, facebook, websites, on-line forum, and etc. With these, more parents will be made aware about their child's learning. Parents' awareness on changes on assessment could help them to play significant role in assisting and helping their child in their learning.

FOLLOW-UP ACTION

This study was conducted in a primary school. The aim of the study is provide clear views on the implementation issues of formative and alternative assessment in school so that the problems related to it can be addressed and explained. The importance of this research is that, it had gathered some detail information and feedback about the issues. This however, does not mean that the issues discussed can be generalised to represent the views of all schools. It is hoped that similar study can be conducted in other primary schools or a longitudinal research could be conducted to observe the progress and development of pupils in the other levels of their learning in school.

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