

Teachers' understanding of school based assessment: A case study of Malaysian primary school teachers

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Abstract

School Based Assessment (SBA) was introduced in Malaysian Primary Schools in 2011 with the intention to integrate assessment into teaching and learning process. Past studies have indicate that teachers often face difficulties in applying new ideas into classroom practices due to unclear understandings about what the new curriculum entails. This qualitative case study examined five teachers' understanding of SBA and how they integrated SBA into the teaching and learning process. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Data analysis revealed differing understanding of SBA, namely SBA as a new way of assessing students learning and SBA as a new teaching methodology. Additionally, it was found that the teachers' application of SBA in the classroom matched with their professed understanding of SBA. Findings suggest that the teachers are in need of continuous support to apply SBA in the classroom. Ongoing and onsite training may best help them to have a clear understanding of SBA and how it can be integrated into teaching and learning.

Keywords: School Based Assessment, Teachers' Understandings, Classroom Assessment

1. Introduction

In the line with the changing trends in assessment, School Based Assessment (SBA) has been introduced into the Malaysian schools under the new integrated curriculum for primary schools known as *Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah* (KSSR). SBA has been seen as a form of leverage for instructional improvement to help teachers to find out what students are learning and how they are learning (Sidhu, Sarjit & Chan, 2011) ^[15].

Previously in Malaysia, teachers were used traditional standard examination for assessing students. Final examinations were always the focus of both teachers and students (Veloo, Krishnasamy & Md Ali, 2015) ^[17]. Presently however, the inclusion of SBA in the education system mean that teachers have to accept formative assessment as a new way of assessing students and their role is no longer merely as teachers but also as ongoing assessors (Hegender, 2010) ^[10].

SBA in Malaysia is a centralized practice, with instructions and regulations delivered top down from policy makers. Teachers do not have the autonomy to implement SBA in the way that suits the teaching and learning situations in their contexts. This is unlike SBA practices in other countries like New Zealand, Finland, Hong Kong and Canada in which teachers have a certain degree of autonomy to conduct classroom assessment accordingly (Samsudin, Premila & Rengasamy, 2014) ^[14].

According to Fullan (2012) ^[8], teachers are the most important agents in implementing a curriculum or new education policy. Therefore, teachers need to have a proper understanding in implementing it. Meanwhile, according to Popham (2011) ^[13], teachers' understanding plays an important role in the implementation process and there is a significant relationship in between teachers' understandings' and their classroom practice. When teachers fail to understand the change and the need for it, it will be difficult for the objectives of the new curriculum to be achieved. This raises the question of what Malaysian teachers understand about SBA. Research on

teachers' understanding of curriculum change indicates that teachers usually have little understanding about a newly implemented curriculum (Fisher & Frey, 2007 ^[7]; Nair, Setia, Samad & *et al.*, 2014 ^[12] & Veloo, Krishnasamy & Md Ali, 2015) ^[17]. Since SBA has only recently been introduced in the Malaysian context, this study intends to examine teachers' understanding of it.

2. Objective of the Study

Using qualitative case study approach, this study explores a group of teachers' understanding of SBA and how they implemented SBA in the teaching and learning process.

3. Methodology

Participants

Using purposive sampling method, five primary school teachers teaching the core subjects (English, Science and Mathematics) and who were directly involved in the SBA implementation were selected to participate in this study. The number of participants was not determined prior to data collection. Instead, it depended on the resources and time available as well as the iterative nature of qualitative data collection (Delamont, 2002) ^[6]. For confidentiality reasons, in this paper nick names were used. They were identified as Johan, Amira, Akasha, Leong and Nita. Johan and Amira have been teaching for more than ten years while Akasha, Leong and Nita have taught less. Researchers also have explained to them about the aim of this research. Johan and Amira are teaching English Language while Akasha and Nita are Science Teacher. Leong is teaching Mathematics.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

For explorative purpose, it was suggested by Braun & Clark (2013) to conduct interviews. Therefore, researchers have conducted semi-structured interviews based on an interview protocol. The interview questions were reviewed to ensure that the participants understood them and able to respond. The

teachers were interviewed three times throughout the study to ensure consistencies in their responses. Following each round of the interviews, data were analyzed for recurrent themes based on a priori categories and emergent categories to reflect the teachers' understanding of SBA (Braun & Clark, 2013 & Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutman & Hanson, 2008).

In the other hand classroom observations were also conducted to examine how the teachers implemented SBA in the classroom. During the observation period, researchers took field notes on each of the practices done by teachers. In order to minimize the researchers' influence on the data collected, each teacher was observed for multiple times. Since participants of this study did not agree for video recording process, researchers just did some audio recording.

In order to creating the themes, researchers have reviewed some of the related literature. Then, all the audio recorded interviews were transcribed. Both of this ways helped the researchers to develop the themes. After develop the themes, data were coded accordingly to the themes. Data revealed from interviews were cross checked with the data revealed from observation. In the final stage all the data from both interviews and observation coded accordingly to the themes that were developed at the early stage of data analysis process. Researchers also reread all the data to ensure that there is no data were left out.

4. Results and Discussion

Data analysis of the teachers' understanding of SBA revealed the following themes: SBA as a change in teaching methodology and SBA as a new way of assessing students learning.

SBA As a Change in Teaching Methodology

Out of the five teachers, three of them said that SBA is a change in teaching methodology. When SBA was introduced, these teachers claimed that they tried to change the way they taught their students.

For me, SBA is more on curriculum change. It is a new way of teaching and learning. In SBA system, teachers need to use variety of methods in teaching (Interview with Amira).

Now I'm using a different ways of teaching which focused on student-centered learning. When I attended the course last year, the instructor told us to use all kinds of activities that cater for students' needs. So, I will ask my students to work more on activities, such as to look for meaning if they cannot understand the meaning of any words (Interview with Johan).

From the interview, it can be seen that both Amira and Johan understood SBA as a new and therefore a different way of teaching. In the case of Johan, SBA seen as promoting student-centered learning and hence he made attempts to provide activities that he perceived support the notion. At the same time, both Johan and Amira agreed that they had to vary their teaching methodologies. These teachers' understandings seemed to align with Stanley & Marsden (2012) argument that in SBA, teachers need to modify their teaching methodology and to play a role as a facilitator and to be student-centered. Nita too talked about varying his teaching activities:

Compared to before, now I like to use games in my Science class, as it can help students to take part actively. Previously I

used to teach, give homework and I didn't focus on how to measure students' achievement in every lesson as we depended solely on mid-term and final exam to measure student achievement (Interview with Nita).

Nita has changed her methods of teaching and tried to vary the way she taught the subject matters to include activities such as games. The introduction of SBA appeared to facilitate Nita and the reset to consider their teaching methodologies and teaching skills.

The observation data revealed that all three teachers were focused on trying out ways of teaching that they believed promote active learning. In other words, their professed understanding of SBA seemed to be translated into actual teaching activities. For example, Amira perceived herself as doing student-centered activities when she gave the following instruction.

Students please try to look at the passage. I will list down 10 words on the board. Then, you try to underline the listed word. Later, try to match the word with suitable meaning where you can find on the next page. You can use your dictionary or discuss with your friends or else you can even predict the meaning by reading the whole text (Observation with Amira).

From the observation field notes, we can say that this teacher was making attempts to give students chances to learn on their own. By providing students with activities such as this, this teacher hoped that the students would learn independently and that they could use strategies such as scanning the text and making predications or consulting friends all of which promote independence. This teachers attempt reflects the experts' call for greater student-centered activities that is the highlight of SBA and the need for teachers to be smarter and to make sure students engage with le lessons.

SBA As a New Way of Assessing Students

From the interviews, it was found that two teachers understood SBA as a new way of assessing students.

I will always look at my student's achievement by looking at their level of progression. I will follow the band system and also the criteria given by Ministry of Education. In my opinion, SBA is more on doing classroom assessment. It means students do not have to sit for mid-term exam or final exam. I need to give any kind of test each time once I finish my lesson (Interview with Akasha).

For me either it is summative or formative assessment, SBA is more on assessing students achievement. I will always look at the students' band and then I'll compile their entire work in their portfolio. So it is a new way of assessment which we did not have during our former curriculum (Interview with Leong).

For Akasha, SBA is understood as an ongoing assessment method. She therefore perceived the need within the SBA framework to assess students more frequently compared to the traditional assessment method. Similarly, Leong too understood SBA as a form of assessment and that is closely linked to the idea of testing students against the scoring bands and compiling their tasks in portfolios. Our examination of the observation data revealed that these teachers' understanding of SBA as an assessment practice was evident in their actual teaching practices, as the following excerpt illustrates.

Students, please make sure that you can answer the entire task I gave to you. If all of you can answer well, we will be moving to the next lesson. If anyone fails to answer all the questions, then I need to teach you again (Observation with Leong).

As shown in the above field notes, Leong tried to make sure that the students could perform the entire task given to them. Leong wanted to ensure that students were well prepared for each test before moving on to a new lesson. He also claimed to understand SBA as a new way of assessing students and his priority in the classroom reflects such understanding which is to test student learning.

As discussed, the data analysis revealed two kinds of understanding about SBA- One as a new type of assessment and the other as a different teaching methodology. Further, these different understandings gave rise to the ways SBA was implemented in the classroom. Our examination of the interview and observation data revealed that teachers who understood SBA as a change in teaching methodology displayed attempts to use different types of teaching methodologies in conducting their lessons while those who have understood SBA as a new way of assessment tended to focus on the assessment process.

The finding alerts us to the extent that the teachers really understood what SBA is about and their readiness to implement SBA in the classroom. Different teachers appeared to have different ideas what SBA entails. What was worrying was the fact that teachers were not completely certain about what they understood, as expressed by Akasha.

I'm not very sure about this SBA. I've attended one course recently. Through that course I got to know that assessment must be ongoing process, but honestly I really don't know how to implement this during my teaching process. Normally, what I will do is, I'll give a test to students, so that is my SBA (Interview to Akasha).

Akasha thought she understood what SBA is, but she had a problem in implementing SBA during her teaching process. Past literature suggests that teachers normally understand that concepts involved in a newly introduced curriculum, but they have often have difficulties the process of implementing it (Cizek, 2010^[3]; Harden, 2001^[9] & Heritage, 2010)^[11]. As for the teachers in our study, their understanding of the concept of SBA itself seemed divided and incomplete. This may explain the way they apply the idea in the classroom which was heavily focused either on teaching aspect or the assessment aspect.

SBA was introduced with the intention to align teaching and assessment together so that they complement one another. However, the teachers in this study had considerably little prior knowledge about SBA and they conducted SBA as they understood it. As Fullan (2012)^[8] asserts, any kind of implementation in schools should be done with special care given to the readiness of the people involved to accept the new and to be familiar with it. Otherwise, the new programme may just end up as another add-on to their already very long to do list. In order to apply SBA appropriately in the classroom, teachers need to be aware that SBA is a process that involves the integration of assessment with teaching and learning process. Teachers need to know that the foundation of SBA is all students are capable of achieving the learning objectives. At the same time, teachers need to know the importance of

continuous feedback and evidence so that each student has a chance to improve his/her performance. Teachers also need to know that two-way communication, written or verbal is crucial for students to know how to improve themselves. Finally teachers need to keep in mind that they should focus more on improvement and less on evaluation (Black & William, 2009)^[1]. The teachers in our study did not seem to understand all these. This fact raises the question about the teachers' readiness to implement SBA in the classroom.

Our study is limited to identifying the teachers' understanding of SBA. Future research needed to explore the process of integrating assessment in teaching and learning, as it can help teachers and authorities to understand the process of implementing SBA in the classroom and the intricacies involved. Additionally, future research can be done to identify the reasons for why teachers have different understanding of SBA system. By knowing the reasons, the respective authorities can take measures to solve the problems relating to misconceptions about the new curriculum.

5. Conclusion

The teachers in this study have different understandings of SBA and they tended to apply SBA as what they have understood. These differences raise questions about the depth of the information that they received from the various trainings that they have been exposed to. What these teachers need are ongoing support and courses so that they can have a clear picture about the nature of SBA, how it can be carried out in the classroom and what the expected outcomes are. Perhaps through intensive ongoing training and possibly an on-site and in the form of action research activities, can the intended outcome of SBA be hoped to achieve. In other words, trainers and teachers need to work together in realizing the objective of SBA in the natural classroom context that is widely known to be complex and extremely challenging (Darling-Hammond, 2010)^[5].

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