
Title	From laissez-faire to standardized tests to holistic assessment: Efforts to infuse “authentic intellectual quality” into the Malay language assessment tasks in Singapore
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From laissez-faire to standardized tests to holistic assessment: Efforts to infuse “authentic intellectual quality” into the Malay language assessment tasks in Singapore.

By

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Abstract

Secular education in the form of Malay school was not introduced in Singapore until the coming of the British colonial in late 19th century. In the early years of its inception, teaching and learning, including assessments in Malay school very much replicated the practices of the long-prevailing religious schools or the *madrasah*. This paper traces the development of assessment practices of Malay school and in Malay language as a subject when Malay school was abolished in 1980s due partly to the growing importance of national schools in Singapore. With economic survival, industrialization, and globalization as the driving force for a series of educational restructuring throughout the life of the city-state, the assessment too, was driven by these factors and, hence, its continual reforms. While the narrative of assessment reforms of the Malay school and the Malay language forms the first part of this paper, the second part covers recent efforts to infuse “authentic intellectual quality” into teachers’ assessments tasks. The criteria of “authentic intellectual quality” will be presented.

Key concepts: *Holistic assessment, Malay language assessments, assessment reforms.*

Introduction

Currently, in Singapore, the majority of the Malay school-going children attend national schools whilst a small minority, in about 400 students per annum, attend the *madrasah* or Muslim religious schools. As part and parcel of Singapore’s bilingual policy, and therefore, whether in the *madrasah* or national schools, Malay pupils offer Malay language as their mother tongue language, other than English language as First Language, as well as mathematics, sciences and humanities subjects. Malay language is also offered by non-Malay students but their number is relatively small. Assessments on the pupils’ oral, aural and written proficiencies in the Malay language have been conducted by schools at regular intervals, and mostly in summative or standardized format. Recently, the idea of teacher-designed formative assessment tasks to supplementing traditional paper-and-pencil tests takes the centre stage, as a result of a rising awareness in the alternative assessment importance in pupils’ active learning and teachers’ responsive teaching in schools.

This paper highlights the initiative by teachers and schools to install “authentic intellectual quality” assessment framework in the teacher-made assessment tasks for the Malay language. The rationale for and elements of the framework forms the main part of this

paper, but prior to that, a brief socio-historical description of the development of Malay language subject assessments is presented as the backdrop.

To appreciate the position of the Malay language in relation its native speakers, viz. the Malays, and the other communities in Singapore, a brief demography of the country is offered. The Malay community is one of the minority groups in the multicultural city-state of Singapore. Singapore consists of 5,183,700 people, out of which 3,789.3 million are its citizens and permanent residents. In 2011, the Malays, which are regarded as the indigenous people of the state numbered only 503,900 or 13.4% out of 3,771.7 million people (citizens and permanent residents). The Chinese community forms the majority (74.1%), whilst the other minority groups include the Indians (9.2%) and the “others” (3.3%) (Singapore Census of population, 2011).

From Laissez-faire to standardized tests

Long before the establishment of secular and mission schools by the British colonial government in Singapore, numerous records indicate the presence of Quranic schools in Singapore (Chelliah, D.D, 1960: 35; Abdul Kadir Munshi, 1939:14-22). Muslim students attending Quranic schools learnt Quran reading and *Jawi* writing. *Jawi* is an improvised form of Arabic letters with the inclusion of some new letters based on Malay sound system. Students who attended the school, with age ranges from 5 to 18 years old or older, congregated in a space or classroom, and received the same instruction from a teacher. Despite the informal nature of the Quran schools, some forms of assessments were installed, viz. reading and writing, for each individual student at his own pace and time.

However, there were no fixed schedule or standardized rules on assessments, and hence, the laissez-faire nature of the whole assessment practices. For instance, after a number of years of study, or after the completion of a number of *surah* or Quranic verses, a student was expected to recite the verses, verbatim, in front of his teacher. Or, when a student felt confident, he submitted himself for an oral examination. One student may take one hour and another takes the whole day to complete a recitation satisfactorily. A student is considered to have fulfilled the requirements of a ‘standard’ satisfactorily when the teacher is contented with the student’s recitation. The purpose of the assessments was not for the students’ placement to the next higher standard or classes, but was to indicate that they have completed the study and was able to recite Quranic verses satisfactorily. Such criterion-referenced assessment practices continued even after the formation of Malay vernacular schools established by the colonial in the beginning of 19th century.

In Singapore, the first recorded formal education in Malay was in the Singapore Free School in 1834 (Wong, H. K. & Gwee, Y.H, 1980: 2). However, such schools were not popular and short-lived. In 1872, attempts were made by the colonial administration, particularly A. M. skinner, the first Inspector of School, to build Malay vernacular schools upon the prevalent Quranic schools. The reading and writing of Malay language, and arithmetic were introduced. Skinner supplied a selection of Malay books and slates to be taught at least four hours daily. In the beginning years of its introduction in the Quranic schools, assessments in the Malay language followed the flexible and random format of the Quranic schools. When these Quranic schools were fully “converted” into Malay stream schools and placed under the wings of the colonial administration, more class standards within the same school were put in place, replicating the structure of the government primary

schools, and hence, annual examinations for placement purposes was installed and under the control of the Inspector of Schools.

After the Second World War and soon after the PAP government came into power in 1959, Malay stream secondary classes were started. The secondary students sat for the Federation of Malay Certificate of Education (Malay) in 1963, subsequently replaced by the Malaysia certificate of Education in 1964 and School Certificate (Malay) in 1969. From 1966, the Higher School Certificate (Malay) was also offered to post-secondary students (Tan, Y. K et al, 2008: 79).

At this juncture, it is interesting to note that in 1960s and as Singapore was still part of Malaysia, the teaching of Malay language was available for three educational streams, viz. Malay as a First Language, Malay as a Second Language, and, Malay as a Third Language. The Malay as a First Language refers to the school subject taken by pupils in Malay stream schools, beginning in Primary 1 and leading to the Malay syllabus X or the National Language (compulsory) for the Malaysia certificate of Education or School certificate Examination. Malay as a Second Language refers to the school subject taken Malay and non-Malay pupils in non-Malay stream schools beginning in Primary 1 and leading to the Malay Syllabus X or the National Language (compulsory) for the Malaysia certificate of Education or School certificate Examination. Malay as a Third Language refers to the National Language course. It is a compulsory school subject for non-Malay pupils to equip them with a practical and functional knowledge of Malay language as the National Language. It began at Primary 3 in the non-Malay primary schools and ended at Secondary 4 (Rosnani Suni, 2004: 173). Public servants were also required to sit for the National Language Public Examinations which was first examined in 1959.

Starting from 1960, Malay language was included as one of the compulsory subjects for students who read Malay language as their Mother Tongue in the national examination for Primary Six pupils, viz. Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). Malay language was also a core subject in the Singapore Cambridge General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level which was introduced at secondary level in 1971 and Singapore-Cambridge General Certificate of Education Advanced Level at pre-university level in 1975. These national examinations served as common examinations for all school-leaving pupils, albeit under different language streams, for purposes of selection for higher education and recognition for employment. In the national examinations of the 1960s and 1970s, pupils have the choice of offering subjects in one of the four languages, and either English or Mother Tongue as first or second language. The national stream, with English as the primary language of instruction, was introduced in 1983, as a result of the overwhelming preference of parents for an English-medium education (Tan, Y. K et al, 2008: 83). Such preference also led to the closure of Malay stream schools in mid-1980s. Shortly after the first introduction of listening comprehension examination for N-Level English Language in 1984, it also became a permanent fixture of Malay language examinations, other than oral and written components.

The move towards holistic assessment

That globalization and knowledge-based economy demands school products to be independent learners and thinkers, and have the capacity, skills and flexibility to face on-going economic and socio-cultural challenges is the key prerequisite to some of the assessment reforms in schools in Singapore. Knowledge-based economy necessitates that

real-life or authentic situations and problems are made part and parcel of classroom teaching, since pupils, who will be the participants of such economy will be facing real-life problems and challenges in their field of work later.

The emphasis on pen-and-paper based examinations as in 1950s and 1960s remains prevalent until today. However, the move towards aligning teaching and testing to achieve language proficiency via alternative modes of assessments such as authentic assessment began to weigh in in the overall Malay language pedagogical repertoire since 2005 through the Malay Language Curriculum and Pedagogy Review recommendations in the same year. Alternative assessment consists of any method of finding out what a student knows or can do that is intended to show growth and inform instruction, and is an alternative to traditional forms of testing (Stiggins, 1991). Authentic assessment refers to the multiple forms of assessment that are consistent with classroom goals, curricula, and instruction that represents classroom and real-life settings (O'Malley and Pierce, 1996). The assessment also reflects student learning, achievement, motivation and attitudes on instructionally-relevant classroom activities.

In tandem with the 2005 review and recommendations, Malay language national examination items were put under scrutiny. Discrete items were replaced with contextually-based items which demand responses that are based on students' full comprehension rather than memorization, and items that require critical thinking were increased in the high-stake national examinations in the same year. Portfolios, performance-based assessment, the use of rubrics as learning tools, research-based assessment were some of the alternative mode of assessments practiced in schools. These changes were to reflect partly the move towards realizing the national vision of "Thinking School Learning Nation" that was adopted in 1997. The vision describes a nation of thinking and committed citizens, and an education system capable of meeting the challenges of the 21st century. The *Teach Less Learn More* call made by the Prime Minister in 2004 drove more educational reforms to be put in place. It was a call for better teaching, improved quality of interaction between teachers and students, and most importantly, students be equipped with the knowledge, skills and values that prepare them for life. Teaching should be focused on developing understanding, critical thinking and the ability to ask questions and seek solutions.

To ensure a sound, relevant and progressive development of Malay language teaching and learning, another round of Malay language curriculum and pedagogy review was conducted in 2010. The 2010 Mother Tongue Languages Review Committee recommendations reaffirm, and therefore accelerate the 2005 recommendations in regard to the employment of alternative modes of assessments in the teaching and learning of Malay language. At any rate, 2010 recommendations include greater use of authentic materials reflective of everyday situations and contexts, so as to better prepare pupils to actively use their Malay language in real-life situations. Also, the Ministry of Education align school-based assessments and national examinations to the desired language proficiencies and test language use in authentic contexts (MOE, 2011).

These educational reforms are a preamble to the formalisation of alternative mode of assessment in Singapore schools under the umbrella of holistic assessment. To meet the 21st century competencies¹ and socio-economic demands, holistic assessment is structurally introduced in Singapore schools formally as a result of a good number of research findings and recommendations conducted by the Ministry of Education under the Primary Education Recommendations and Initiatives or PERI in 2009. The schools have also gone beyond "pen-

and-paper” testing and adopted multiple assessment modes. Teachers also use assessment information to improve teaching and pupils’ learning (MOE press media, 2010).

Holistic assessment framework is inclusive in approach and action. While the framework embraces the assessment for learning that places higher premium on formative and alternative assessments, it recognizes the necessity of summative or standardized tests for placement of students at higher level of schooling. In other words, holistic assessment recognises the currency of each mode of assessment, be it formative or summative, teacher and school-based or national standard. The holistic assessment framework also applies in Malay language teaching and learning. Under PERI, at Primary One and Two levels, summative testing is suspended and in its place, bite-sized formative assessments are installed with the emphasis on developing students’ communicative skills and values. It is within the formative assessments, and not conventional assessments of student achievement that authentic intellectual quality can be and is actively ingrained.

Authentic intellectual quality in Malay language assessments

As much as education must reflect the reality of the socio-economy, teaching, learning and assessments, therefore, cannot be devoid of real-world situations. Also, teaching, learning and assessments cannot be conducted in separation from each other (Somers, 2010). Assessments need to reflect the learning and teaching in classrooms. Discrete assessment items found largely in summative assessments and standardized tests are therefore not sufficiently able to prepare students to face such demands of the 21st century economy.

Conventional assessment of student achievement historically has focused on the reproduction of factual and procedural knowledge from students (Moss, Girard and Haniford 2006, quoted from Koh, 2009: 292). Students’ ability to accurately select one of a number of options to brief questions, as in multiple choice mode, does not reflect what students will be called on to do in solving complex problems, communicating significant ideas, persuading others on important positions, organizing information and managing human resources, and working cooperatively with others in the workplace (Wiggins, 1989, 1993). In contrast, when teachers assigned more intellectually demanding assignments, pupils were able to demonstrate more complex intellectual performance in their work (Newmann and Associates, 1996; Newmann et al. 1998, and 2001). Newmann et al.’s (1996) ‘authentic intellectual work’ consists of three criteria, viz. construction of knowledge, disciplined inquiry, and value beyond the school. Newmann and colleagues claim that authentic intellectual task gives rooms for pupils to engage in higher-order thinking and real-world problem-solving rather than just routine use of facts and procedures. Where teachers aim for authentic student performances, they create assignments or assessment tasks that called upon students to construct their own meaning or knowledge, through in-depth disciplined inquiry. This in turn is linked to real-world problems that have meaning and applicability beyond success in school (Koh, 2009: 294).

In their attempt to evaluate the quality of the teachers’ assignments or assessment tasks in Singapore schools, Koh, K. and Luke, A. (2009) adopted Newmann’s criteria for observing ‘authentic pedagogy’ and assessing ‘authentic intellectual work’, as well as the Singapore Classroom Coding Scheme. Singapore Classroom Coding Scheme (Luke, Cazden et al., 2005) attempted to describe the elements of pedagogy not covered in Newmann’s original criteria, by using Bernstein’s (1990) concepts of classification and framing to focus

on how knowledge is textually represented and contextualised in teacher assignments or assessment tasks. This led to the inclusion of criteria for knowledge criticism, knowledge manipulation, and depth of knowledge (Koh, K. and Luke, A., 2009: 294). As a result, Koh and Luke put forth nine criteria to assessing the ‘authentic intellectual quality’ of teacher-designed tasks:- 1) depth of knowledge (*tahap kedalaman pengetahuan*), 2) knowledge criticism (*kritikan pengetahuan*), 3) knowledge manipulation (*pengendalian pengetahuan*), 4) sustained writing (*pengembangan penulisan*), 5) clarity and organization (*kejelasan dan penyusunan*), 6) connections to the real world beyond the classroom (*perkaitan dengan dunia sebenar di luar lingkungan bilik darjah*), 7) supportive task framing (*kerangka pengukuhan tugas*), 8) student control (*kuasa pelajar*), and 9) explicit performance standards/marking criteria (*standard-standard prestasi/kriteria pemarkahan yang tersurat*). In addition, six criteria were adopted to evaluate the quality of student work: 1) depth of knowledge, 2) knowledge criticism, 3) knowledge manipulation, 4) sustained writing, 5) quality of student writing/answers (*mutu tulisan/jawapan pelajar*), and 6) connections to the real world beyond the classroom.

Briefly, depth of knowledge (*tahap kedalaman pengetahuan*) refers to the factual knowledge, procedural knowledge and conceptual knowledge found in the revised Bloom’s taxonomy of intended student learning outcomes (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001). Evaluation in this domain focuses on the extent to which teachers require students to demonstrate mastery of knowledge in day-to-day classroom assignments. Knowledge criticism is a predisposition to the generation of alternative perspectives, critical arguments, and new solutions or knowledge (Luke 2004, in Koh, 2009: 295). Knowledge manipulation calls for an application of higher-order thinking and reasoning skills in the reconstruction of texts, intellectual artefacts and knowledge. This criterion includes sustained writing and “connections to the real world beyond the classroom”, as well as teacher’s supportive task framing or scaffolding. As active learners who are responsible for their learning development and comprehension, students are given the opportunity to determine the scope of a task such as topics or questions to respond to, alternative approaches, instruments and resources to use. All these come under “student control” criterion which also includes students’ voice in the workings of performance or marking criteria.

Over the period of two years (2004-2005), the above criteria were used by Koh and Luke (2009) to evaluate a huge sample of teachers’ assignments or assessment tasks from various subjects, including the Malay language, and associated student work from Primary 5 and Secondary 3 of 59 schools. The types of assignments included the full range of activities such as daily class work, homework assignments, major projects, and teacher-made tests. This writer was also involved in the project as a facilitator in evaluating the Malay language teachers’ assignments and the corresponding student works. A group of Malay Heads of Department from five schools served as markers of the assessment tasks by the teachers and students. And, at the request of the Malay teachers and later as part of their in-service courses, a series of workshops on the alternative mode of assessments were conducted in schools to strengthen teachers’ assessment literacy from 2005 onwards.

Although the report of the findings of the project is beyond the scope of this paper, it needs to be highlighted that the project is a milestone in the development of the Malay language alternative assessment modes. At the very least, the project gave the Malay Heads of Department the first-hand opportunity to reflect upon the types of assessment tasks subscribed by Malay teachers and prescribed to students in schools and the “authentic intellectual quality” that those tasks possess. Beyond simply designing school-based

assessments, Malay language teachers who have gone through the courses are very much aware of the need to continually assess the authentic intellectual quality of those assessments and the quality of students' responses as a corresponding result of teachers' assignments. "What you give is what you get" can now be understood by Malay teachers in a better light in the realm of assessment.

Challenges

The efforts to install "authentic intellectual quality" framework in teacher-designed tasks are not without challenges. First, teachers need to be empowered with the assessment literacy and the conviction to implementing the framework for the benefit of students' educational development, future career and socio-cultural place. The realization that life mirrors education and assessment mirrors the real world is new to the Malay language teachers, and for that matter, educationists in general. Second, support from schools is another critical factor to ensure the success of the framework. It is not an unfamiliar scene when the framework, if it was ever installed in schools, would cease to be applied when pupils are 'prepared' for the high-stake national examinations. Third, teachers' multitude teaching and administrative tasks against the time needed to build good assessment tasks. Again, support from school is very crucial in alleviating these challenges. Fourth, while parents' awareness of the alternative assessments is growing, the backlash effect (assessment drives learning) still prevails. Hence, demands from parents for schools to produce excellent academic results in high-stake examinations are still prevalent, if not increasing. This demand in turns necessitates teachers to spend more time preparing students to be "exam-smart" by going through "ten-year series" (part-years examination questions) with their students.

Conclusion

Assessments in the Malay language subject have developed along educational, national developmental interests and global demands. From laissez-faire approach that emphasizes individual progression at the individual's pace and teachers' wisdom and subjectivity, to state-directed approach that enhances ability-driven education through national-standardized tests, assessments in the Malay language are now moving towards authenticity through alternative mode of assessment and holistic assessment framework. Under this framework, the "authentic intellectual quality" criteria have greater capacity to further enhancing and refining this assessment reform which supports the national ideal of producing independent thinking individuals who are well-equipped, with knowledge, skills and values, to face the challenges of the 21st century and beyond.

I end this paper by reiterating O'Malley (1996) that if complex thinking and academic language skills are important component of today's curriculum, assessment should reflect these emphases. And in the context of Malay language, if students learn complex procedures most effectively when they have opportunities to apply the skills in meaningful ways, then Malay language assessments should be authentic reflections of these kinds of meaningful learning opportunities.

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ⁱThe Ministry of Education identifies the following as the 21st century competencies:- In the realm of social-emotional: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management, responsible decision-making; in the realm of skills: information and communication skills; civic literacy, global awareness and cross-cultural skills; and critical and inventive thinking. The culmination of the said competencies will produce confident person, self-directed learner, active contributor and concerned citizens (MOE March 2012, at <http://www.moe.gov.sg/committee-of-supply-debate/files/nurturing-our-young.pdf>).