

# The Effectiveness of School-Based Oral English Assessment from the Perspective of Experienced and Novice Teachers in Malaysia

Muhammad Haziq Bin Ismail<sup>1</sup>, Quek Khai Xian<sup>2</sup>, Rukmani a/p Sivalingam<sup>3</sup>, Siti Nur Khatijah Binti Ishak<sup>4</sup>

**Abstract** – There are many ways to assess the different skills in English. Assessing oral proficiency is however a tough job for teachers. The limitation in the oral proficiency assessment is vast, especially in the Malaysian context. Hence, the Ministry of Education has implemented the Malaysian School Based Oral English Assessment (SBOA) in 2002 with the aim to assess the students' oral proficiency. This paper intends to review the effectiveness of SBOA from the perspective of teachers of different years of teaching experience. A qualitative study will be carried out among 6 national primary school teachers which are grouped into two; 3 teachers with less than 10 years of teaching experiences and another 3 teachers with more than 10 years teaching experiences. The data collection process will involve the use of semi-structured interviews. This paper examines the question: Is School Based Oral English Assessment effective from the perspectives of novice and experienced teacher? This study also explores the challenges faced by teachers in conducting this formative oral assessment. Recommendations will be made based on the results and thus the study has significant implications for the implementation of formative oral assessment in the Malaysian classroom.

**Keywords** – School-based assessment, teachers' teaching experiences, effectiveness of School Based Oral English Assessment, speaking assessment

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

In 2002, a standardised national scale school-based Oral English Test (OET) was introduced to Malaysian schools. It was introduced with the aim to help the secondary school students to improve their English oral competency. It was school-based which also meant that the teacher would assess the students' speaking skills in class after having spent teaching and learning time together. The teachers' evaluation towards the students' oral competency would then be the students' official OET results. It was a move to improve students' speaking skills as well as to prepare them to face the real-world situation which largely required English as basic communication skills. However, introducing OET in the Malaysian secondary schools was not effective enough since it failed to offer the true reflection of students' actual communication skills (Gurnam, Chan, & Sarjit, 2011). With the recent testing and evaluation trends highly focusing on the decentralisation of examinations, school-based formative and authentic assessments are seen as one of the measures leading towards decentralisation of examinations. With the aim to catch up with the global trends and also to improve the students' oral competency, the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) has launched the School Based Assessment in 2011 to replace the centralised examination. Examinations tend to reduce the students' thinking process which would prevent creativity so there is a need to prepare students to think outside the box (Gurnam, Chan,

& Sarjit, 2011). It is also stressed that students should be given ample time and learning opportunities to show their learning abilities. With this intention in mind, School Based Oral Assessment (SBOA) has been implemented in the Malaysian public schools. It also moves away from the traditional method of teaching to a more communicative one since SBOA requires the teachers to assess the students' speaking proficiency in the classroom as well as teaching and testing to be integrated in the classroom at once (Zaitun, Arshad, Mazanah, & Malachi, 2011). Besides, SBOA has the advantage of fairer assessment which was lacking in the national summative examination. The assessment focuses on social skills that centre on interpersonal relationships and working with others which cannot be assessed clearly in national centralised examination. (Suseela & Sim, 2010)

Since SBOA now requires the teachers to assess the students' speaking proficiency, there have always been a mix of different opinions on the implementation and effectiveness of SBOA. There are questions from teachers who doubt the effectiveness of SBOA since the official results of the oral component come solely from the teachers who assess the students. These teachers comment that there are cases in which unethical teachers were not honest with the results in order to make the reputation and overall results of the school good. Some teachers also mention that implementing SBOA in the classroom actually takes away their teaching time. They have been in the education industry for long and they are not trained on how to

properly assess the students. Of course there have been courses organised by the MOE on the implementation but not all the teachers were called to attend the courses. All these make up the resistance among some teachers towards the SBOA which in the end directly affects the results of it. On the other hand, there are also teachers who find SBOA pretty in effect because it provides fairer and better assessment to the students who may not be able to perform well in the national summative centralised examination. Most of these teachers are novice teachers who have been trained to assess the students' oral proficiency.

This paper focuses on the assessment of the students' English speaking skills in the SBA implementation. Deeper insights of the effectiveness and implementation of the SBOA through interviews with Malaysian public schools teachers are provided to top up to the research conducted on SBA in Malaysia.

### 1.1 Research Question

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

1. How does teachers' teaching experience affect their perspective towards the effectiveness of SBOA?
2. How are the issues in the implementation of SBOA overcome by teachers of different years of teaching experience?

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of literature comprises two sections: School-based Assessment (SBA) and speaking assessment.

### 2.1 School-based Assessment (SBA)

Assessment is an essential part of instruction, as it concludes if the goals of instruction are being achieved. There are many types of assessment which serve different purposes throughout the students' learning. Assessment is used as a tool to provide feedback to students about their learning which we often refer to as assessment-for-learning or formative assessment. Assessment can also be used to certify students' level of achievement in their learning which we label as assessment-of-learning or summative assessment. In addition, assessment is also a method to evaluate and adjust teaching as the students' learning takes place.

Nowadays, students do not require only the basic reading and arithmetic skills but also the skills to deal with real-life challenges. They need the skill to think critically and creatively as well as to analyse. Hence, there comes the need to change the relationship between assessment and instruction. Teachers need to take a dynamic role in deciding the aims of assessment and the content that is being assessed. Such assessment or in other words, alternative assessment requires students to do some tasks with their knowledge. They are assessed based on what they know and learn. This complies with one of the criteria of the SBA which is that the assessment is school-based.

According to Liljedahl (2010), there are four purposes of assessment – communication, valuing what is taught, reporting and not sorting or ranking. Communication is a way for students to communicate learning to teacher and for the teacher to communicate back to the students a note on their learning. What teachers choose to evaluate show the students what it is the teachers value so assessment should be based on what is taught. Assessment is also used to gather information to report students' progress out to the other stakeholders. To sort and/or to rank students based on assessment is both internally and externally problematic because it presupposes the objectivity of assessment internally and ignores students' individuality externally.

Moreover, classroom assessment gives students the opportunity to show what they have learned rather than catching them out (Jabbarifar, 2009). As a classroom is full of communication, the students would not mind making mistakes. They believe that they can learn and challenging tasks are just opportunities to make themselves smarter (William, 2013). SBA is carried out in the Malaysian classrooms with the aim to break down the barriers the students have towards summative examinations. Teachers encourage the students to monitor improvements in their performance over time through repeated self-assessment (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2005). Students are given feedback on their Oral Assessment (SBOA) where they may choose to redo the assessment until both students and teacher are satisfied with the grade. This is where students are given the authority to take charge of their learning through communicating with the teacher. They would also value what is taught because they know exactly what they are learning and how they are assessed. Thus, it is not only the teachers who do the grading but the students are also part of the grading too.

SBA is an influential instructional tool. However, Chapman & Snyder (2000) had mentioned that the full benefits of SBA cannot be realised until and unless teachers

comprehend the idea of SBA as well as own the knowledge, skills and attitudes to practise it efficiently. Begum & Farooqui (2008) have also stated that teachers should be provided with necessary counselling and guidance in matters related to implementation of the new assessment system. Looking at the current situation in Malaysia, it is hard to judge whether or not the SBA is effective until we study the teachers' perspectives. This paper, therefore, is intended to study the perspective of novice and experienced teachers in the implementation of SBOA.

## 2.2 School Based Oral Assessment (SBOA) in Malaysia

The school-based oral assessment (SBOA) has become part of important evaluation in KSSR curriculum. SBOA is a kind of formative assessment where teachers need to do continuous assessment towards students' proficiency level in their listening and speaking skills. The aim of this new assessment, in-line with the KSSR curriculum is to enhance students' oral communication and creative skills (Gurnam, Chan & Sarjit, 2011). Based on the description given by Malaysian Examination Board, SBOA is designed, produced, administered and graded by teachers in schools. However, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has provided some guidelines for teachers to assist in the implementation of the SBOA by providing rubrics, graders and suggested activities for the assessment. In addition, SBOA will be conducted by the subject teachers during the teaching and learning process. Teachers will implement the SBOA based on the standard document developed by MOE.

Under this new form of assessment, teachers are given a huge responsibility to conduct the assessment towards the pupils as they have better understanding of their own pupils' performance in language and have deeper understanding of the context in the subject area. Therefore, it is beneficial to teachers as they can continuously monitor the pupils' progress in the classroom through guiding and giving constructive feedback to the pupils (Brown, 2001). Additionally, teachers are given the empowerment to make further decisions whether or not to proceed with a new topic or to give necessary support for those learners through SBOA.

Since SBOA is considered as a new component in KSSR syllabus, teachers regardless of their teaching experiences might experience some confusion and might hold different interpretations in implementing this new form of assessment in classroom. It is unclear how to effectively evaluate teachers' understanding about SBOA and whether they have implemented such practices within their instructional repertoires (William, 2011). Among of all

these four language skills, assessing oral proficiency is quite challenging for teachers to evaluate their students' ability (Huerta-Marcías, 1995). Compared to writing, speaking activity requires spontaneity in response as well as the evaluation of intonation, appropriate body gestures and correct use of vocabulary, grammar and sentence structures.

Moreover, these responses are not being recorded in written material. Thus, it becomes subjective for the teachers to grade the students (Shohamy, 1983). The manner in which the evaluation of oral assessment is conducted is still vague among the teachers. Each teacher might have different views and grading system towards students' proficiency level in listening and speaking (Huerta-Marcías, 1995). This research aims to study the teachers' perspective and views on the implementation of SBOA.

## 3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study used qualitative case study method and data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers involved in School-based Oral English Assessment. The interview questions were generated from a review of related literature and insights from informal discussions with teachers. It was then fine-tuned with the help of experts in the faculty. In order to probe the teachers' perception further, semi-structure interview was used because it permitted a level of in-depth information gathering, free responses and flexibility that cannot be obtained by other methods and procedures as well as providing rich data to explain the phenomena under the study (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). Each interview session was audio recorded with the respondents' permission and then transcribed for analysis.

For this study, six English teachers involved in the SBOA in the same national public primary schools were selected as respondents. They were selected based on the purposive sampling technique because their profession and pedagogical practices of SBA represent the general school teacher population (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2010). The teachers were easily accessible to one of the researchers of the study so this made the sampling practical. These teachers were divided based on their teaching experience in the primary school.

## 4.0 FINDINGS

The data analysis process started as soon as the semi-structured interviews had been carried out successfully. The researcher carried out semi-structured interview with

three novice teachers and three experienced teachers respectively regarding their perspectives towards SBOA. The data were collected based on the individual responses from the interviews.

#### 4.1 Understanding of SBOA

The first part of the interview session focused on the respondents' understanding of the implementation of SBOA. The researcher dealt with the respondents' knowledge on the main aspects of SBOA such as the objectives, preparation, administration, implementation and scoring. Through the semi-structured interviews, it was revealed that all the teachers possessed the basic knowledge of the main aspects of SBOA because they were able to spell out its outlines as stated in the SBOA manual provided by the Ministry of Education to the school. The researcher had also noted down that all three novice teachers were just recalling what they had been taught in their teachers' training institute. One of them, Respondent N1, mentioned this:- "Okay...Basically SBOA is just an assessment set by the school teachers and they evaluate the students based on the school standards." The other teacher, Respondent N2, also gave a similar response but with the addition that, "it is actually just the same as what has been done all this while except that the students are not evaluated by the external bodies." Meanwhile, it was also found that the experienced teachers do not understand the main aspects of SBOA exactly like how it was stated in the SBOA manual. All three experience teachers gave similar responses as follow:- "Teachers just simply assess the students based on their own standards." However, it could be summed up that all teachers mentioned SBOA as an assessment conducted for students by respective English teachers using the guideline provided by respective schools. The teachers had also brought up the differing guidelines in different schools. "If your school have more fluent students then of course you will have a higher standard guidelines to assess the students," mentioned one of the experienced teachers, Respondent E3. The other experienced teachers, Respondent E1 and E2, had also stated this, "Of course there are schools which want to help their students so much that they just simply lower the bar of the guidelines." While the experienced teachers mentioned these, the novice teachers were not very sure of such a situation. This was when the researcher had found out that the novice teachers were merely spelling out from the manual.

#### 4.2 Implementation of SBOA

The second part of the interview concentrated on the implementation of SBOA. All the respondents unanimously agreed that they did not see the effectiveness of this

assessment regardless of whether they managed to carry it out in school based on the guidelines given. They had simultaneously pointed out that there was not any difference in SBOA as compared to the OET. One of the experienced teachers, Respondent E2, mentioned that, "It is just a change of terminology and implementation method." The experienced teachers commented that basically the assessment was the same except the implementation method in which OET involved examiners of other schools (external bodies) while SBOA involved school teachers. They further explained that the only difference was that school teachers would have more time to evaluate the students without setting a specific time but they still did not see the effectiveness after several years of being implemented. Meanwhile, the novice teachers did not have many remarks on the effectiveness of SBOA if compared to the previous OET because they were not exposed too deeply in OET.

#### 4.3 Challenges of SBOA

The third part of the interview focused on the implementation of SBOA in a real classroom situation. Previously, all the respondents were able to deliver their understanding of SBOA. However, for this part of the interview, it was revealed that the opinions were divided between novice and experienced teachers. It was seen obviously that the novice teachers struggled in assessing the students merely based on the guidelines. One of the novice teachers, Respondent N2, had claimed that the:- "SBOA is very subjective and everything beginning from the preparation to the scoring of this assessment are left to the discretion of the teacher." The novice teachers also pointed out that they have very limited guidelines from the Ministry of Education (MOE) and it made the already subjective assessment even tougher and more confusing. They were keen to help the students to score higher grades since it was based on school guidelines but as they were implementing it, they became unsure whether to focus on drilling the students to speak English or to go through the syllabus as required in the English curriculum. In addition, they also did not have a set example to follow through because some of the teachers adopted the individual assessment method while the other teachers assessed the students in groups. They also identified one of the main problems in which the students were very accustomed to their mother tongue and with the limited instruction time, it became harder to have the students speak English. All three of them agreed that this made the implementation challenging for them.

On the other hand, the experienced teachers knew the ways to assess the pupils better. They also pointed out the

same problems – time factor, assessing methods and mother tongue – as mentioned by the novice teachers. “We really need to chase after time since we also have to complete the syllabus of the English curriculum,” stated one of the experienced teachers, Respondent E2. They noted that their many years of teaching experience had eventually guided them to assess the students more effectively. As they were familiar with teaching, they were able to find out the suitable ways to assess the students. A teacher, Respondent E1, stated that:- “the main purpose of SBOA is to assess the students’ speaking in a relax manner. So what I practise is that I always speak proper English to my students in school.” They agreed that this actually would help the students become more familiarised with English and enable them to participate in SBOA. This made SBOA less burdensome because the students were made known to the assessment and the teachers could carry it out as scheduled.

## 5.0 DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS

From the analysis of data obtained from the surveys and interviews with teachers, experienced teachers manage to carry out SBOA well. The experience and knowledge that they have helped them to conduct SBOA more efficiently. This group of teachers made sure that the students would benefit from SBOA. The students acquire both the ability to speak fluent English and a good remark in SBOA under the guidance of experienced teachers. On the other hand, the novice teachers need proper guidelines on the objectives, frameworks, and the implementation of SBOA at the school level. A clear sense of direction, purpose, proper task design, scoring methods, freedom from bias, and effective use of assessment would enable these teachers to carry out efficient and effective SBOA (Stiggins, 2004). Clear guidelines would also bring about a certain degree of uniformity and standardisation in the practice of SBOA.

Developing teachers’ knowledge based on formative assessment and linguistic literacy appeared to be another important task of the Ministry of Education (MOE). Focused, intentional, and collaborative discussions among the primary school English language teachers, preferably facilitated by the school’s English Head of Panel could help teachers improve their knowledge on formative assessment and linguistic literacy capabilities. Collaborative and engaging discussions of the SBOA practices and implementation strategies should be carried out on a regular basis to enable the novice teachers to focus on the objectives when conducting SBOA in schools.

Finally, novice teachers provided with well-designed professional development programmes could make tremendous impact on the successful implementation of SBOA. As Ramsey (2005) argued, the emphasis on developing teachers’ skills in assessment methods and procedures could bring about positive results with regard to the implementation of SBOA. More effective and frequent in-house training by the experiences teachers will give the novice teachers a better grasp of the content as well as the method of carrying out the oral assessment in schools. Also, novice teachers should also be convinced of the benefits of SBOA in order to carry out SBOA more effectively.

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

As can be understood from the above findings, there are clear differences on how experienced teachers see and implement the knowledge on SBOA as compared to the novice teachers due to the number of years of experience in the education field. However, throughout the research, we can say that the positive impact on the new system of assessing students’ oral proficiency outweighs the weaknesses of it. The new system is said to be fairer especially for those who do not have the capabilities to excel in the summative form of assessment but are able to flourish more on the formative form.

The main thing that stopped this system from working efficiently is the lack of working knowledge and experiences that guide the novice teacher to help them assess their students accurately. Providing solutions to this issue would not just be life-saving but also serves as a basic foundation to build a proper standardised assessment for the new system. As mentioned before, a well-designed professional development programme would really help the teachers during transition from the old to the new system of oral assessment and also to maintain the momentum that has been built. One of the main benefits of the SBOA is that this assessment focuses more on social skills which means the student would have better chance to practise speaking and working with others as a functional unit of any given situation in real life.

Nevertheless, this research has provided us with some new insights on the weakness and strength of the SBOA. It comes together with the potential solutions to overcome the problem as well as to improve overall experience and practice among teachers.

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