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## Using Observation to Test Speaking Skills among Primary Students Based on School Based Assessment: Malaysian Teachers' Perceptions

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### **Abstract:**

*The school based assessment was introduced in the primary level in Malaysian schools in the year 2011. This assessment was established and implemented by the Education Ministry Curriculum Development Department in the new Primary School Standard (The Integrated Curriculum for Primary School) or KSSR to allow students to explore their own abilities. This study has been conducted to investigate the usage of observation method to assess speaking skills among primary students. Basically, in order to gather information based on the set of questionnaires were given to 40 primary school teachers comprising year 1 to year 4 English teachers from different schools. This paper examines the preferences by the teachers on using the observation method or the one to one method in an oral based assessment and also suggestions to improve or revise these methods that will be conducted in the speaking skills assessment in the future.*

### **1. Introduction**

The Malaysian Education system has gone through many new phases and amendments to ensure that it brings the best out of the students from all levels. Similarly, the speaking test conducted in schools also has gone through tremendous changes due to deliberation by the Curriculum Development Department. The tests had gone through two major eras which is the KBSR era to the KSSR era.

Husin (1991) stated that KBSR is an education system in which English language subject focuses on skills of listening, speaking, reading, understanding and writing. All of these are prior to their previous knowledge and experiences. During the implementation of KBSR speaking tests were conducted using the one to one method which involves the teacher and the student himself/herself. The students were given stimulus and were asked several questions based on the stimulus given. The teacher evaluates them accordingly based on their understanding in order to assess the proficiency level of the students. This type of oral test and the method were carried out more than a few decades.

A study conducted by Hassan & Selamat (2002) reported that speaking is the weakest skill acquired by learners due to the lack of attention given to it. This is a challenge for classroom teachers and researchers of learners' speaking abilities. Knowing what to test specifically and how to conduct the testing process require applicable theories and valid procedures that map out the direction of the assessment. As a result, drawing upon applied linguistic theories on what is to be tested in speaking becomes essential for teachers and researchers.

In line with this, in the year 2011, The Curriculum Development Department decided to improve our Malaysian Education system by introducing the new primary School Standard Curriculum (The Integrated Curriculum for Primary School) or KSSR to give ample room or freedom for the teachers to bring out their creativity especially in their ways of teaching. This new curriculum is considered the benchmark for producing creative and innovative skills. There will be less use of the "chalk and talk" method as this system introduces a new way of learning English. According to Chapman (2010), "it will be more holistic and less examination oriented for pupils".

Teachers are required to come up with new teaching and learning activities which are more student centered and a fun learning environment. In accordance to that, speaking test was basically changed by implementing the observation method conducted in the class. It caused pandemonium among the teachers as they faced a lot of challenges to evaluate each and every student in the particular test.

## 2. Literature Review

As explained previously, the implementation of School-Based Assessment in Malaysian schools is strongly recommended in the latest educational policies of the Malaysian ministry of Education. This section presents the most relevant literature relating to speaking assessment, its' challenges and the importance of teachers' perception. It first provides a discourse on the principles of assessing young learners' language skills to set the theoretical background of the paper. Next, it highlights a discussion of issues relating to the reliability of speaking assessment teacher's perceptions and conclusions drawn based on research findings.

### 2.1. Theoretical background

The nature of assessing children's language learning is different from adult learners. Cameron (2001) pointed out a few factors that need to be taken seriously by educators in assessing the language learning of children such as age, content of the language learning, methods of teaching used in the classroom, aims of the lessons, and learning theories. It is vital to keep in mind that children develop differently in term of motor skills, linguistic and social development. In order to assess children, some guidelines and consideration should be taken into account. McKay (2006) emphasized the need for classroom-based assessment such as observations, portfolios, self-assessment and peer-assessment for children. However, he believes that the observation method used should be modified into incidental and planned observation. He also suggested that an effective language assessment must give opportunities for students to use the language. Therefore, what a teacher can do is to focus on the formulaic expression and gradually introduce the more discrete-point assessments in future. Knowing that the young learners are vulnerable to failure and criticism, the assessment tasks have to be achievable so that they can experience a sense of success. In the child-level assessment, Epinosa and Lopez (2007) recommended that teachers should use the kind of tasks they are regularly engaged in the classroom with clear instruction. This would make the assessment less formal and the students more familiar with the assessment tasks. All these aspects should be taken into consideration so that the assessment task would be effective in providing the information regarding the learner's progress. (Palmer,1991).

### 2.2. Speaking Skill

Among the four language skills, it has been widely recognized that speaking, particularly in a second language learning, is the most difficult skill to assess. However, according to Madsen (1983) and Luoma (2004), the testing of speaking is widely regarded as the most challenging of all language tests to prepare, administer, and score. Thus, it is no surprise that testing oral proficiency has become one of the most important issues in language testing as the role of speaking has become more central in language teaching (Hartley & Sporing, 1999, Luoma, 2004), especially with the advent of communicative language teaching. However, there are numerous difficulties in the construction and administration of any speaking assessment. There is great discrepancy between the predominance of the communicative approach and the accurate measurement of the ability to communicate (Hughes, 2001). Unless learners are being recorded, oral production is transient in which all spoken words go off with the wind, unlike written production. The problem of testing oral ability makes teachers reluctant to take it on as they lack confidence in the validity of their assessment. Such problems include the practical problem of finding the time, the facilities and the personnel for testing oral ability and the problem of being consistent. Most of the low proficient learners find oral assessment very stressful. In term of reliability and validity, oral assessors need to be trained to ensure the validity of the elicitation task and the reliability of the score given to the students. Since the role of speaking is gaining importance in language teaching, Kim (2003) notes that testing oral proficiency has become a vital issue in language testing. The basic problem in testing oral ability, says Hughes (2001), is we want to set tasks that form a representative sample of the population of oral tasks that we expect candidates to be able to perform. He contends that the tasks should elicit behaviour which truly represents the candidates' ability and which can be scored in a valid and reliable manner.

Although some researchers strongly believe in classroom-based assessments, others do not trust this type of assessment method. Worthen (1993) pointed out that classroom-based assessment is unable to show convincing reliability and validity, so it hardly has a bright future. He also suggested that classroom-based assessments' heavy dependence on teachers might raise the concern of how fairly teachers can assess the students. Kim (2003) thought that most of classroom-based assessment methods were too informal and teachers needed to develop more expertise with them.

### 2.3. Teachers' Perception

Teachers are one of the most important factors in the process of classroom-based speaking assessments. They should have "meaningful goals for instruction and clear purposes for assessment" (Wolf, 1993). They decide what to assess, when to assess, and how to assess; they are the main interpreters and users of classroom-based reading assessment results. Also, they are the most experienced people in assessing students' learning since classroom-based assessments is a part of their instruction. Therefore, it is important to know how teachers perceive and use classroom-based assessments.

This study of teachers' beliefs forms part of the process of understanding how teachers conceptualize their work especially in relation to classroom based assessment. In order to understand how teachers approach their work it is necessary to understand the beliefs and principles they operate from. Golombek (1998) affirms the notion that changes in teachers' beliefs precede changes in their teaching practices. Similarly, Hampton (1994) notes that teachers' beliefs or "personal constructs" determine how they approach their teaching. These beliefs may be quite general or very specific. Research related to classroom-based speaking assessment has flourished in recent years. Some have contributed to theoretical frameworks in this subject; some have focused on studying the application of certain assessment methods and the challenges in classrooms. However, few studies have been done in understanding teachers' perceptions towards speaking assessment and the use of classroom-based assessments.

- What are the challenges faced by the teachers in conducting the observation method in their speaking test?
- What are the suggestions to enhance the observation method to a better level which will be conducted in future speaking test?

### 3. Methodology

This study is concerned with describing teachers' perceptions towards using observation to test speaking abilities among primary school pupils. Cox (2011) suggested that the key to thinking about talk in the classroom is to foreground that classroom talk is genuine and not always in response to teacher questions and teacher – led discourse. Therefore, many types of activities can be the domain to test oral abilities including group discussions, presentations, role play, and interview sessions with the teacher and so in this study, a survey was conducted to elicit background knowledge from experienced primary school teachers in regards to the use of observations to test speaking abilities; its effectiveness and teachers' preferences. A survey was conducted as Sincero (2012) stated surveys provide uniform definitions to all the subjects who are to answer the questionnaires. Thus, there is a greater precision in terms of measuring the data gathered. Hence, this survey was aimed to gather information from the teachers and to get valid responses from the educators on using observation in testing speaking abilities of primary school pupils.

#### 3.1. The Participants

The survey was sent to the target group of 40 primary school teachers in Malaysia who are teaching Year 1, Year 2, Year 3 or Year 4 based on the new curriculum KSSR (The Integrated Curriculum for Primary School). These teachers had been encouraged by the new curriculum to mainly use observation to test speaking skills among pupils to promote authentic testing. The survey was intended to gather information about the teachers' views and experiences in conducting the speaking test and assessment. The survey is also to get responses regarding testing speaking skills, to know whether the observation method is an efficient way to test speaking in an authentic way or the teachers prefer other methods in testing the speaking ability. In addition, teachers as participants in this study, are encouraged to suggest one of the ways or techniques in using the observation method in testing speaking abilities effectively. Wortham (1990) suggested that the classroom teacher can supplement information from standardized tests, and informal evaluations to determine student strengths and weaknesses in content areas. Hence, the teachers' views as language testers are highly valuable because these teachers were the ones who went through teaching and learning process and conducted testing and assessment in the classroom.

#### 3.2. Instrument

The survey was designed based on a five-point response format or Likert Scale to investigate teachers' preferences towards statements in the survey. La Marca (2011) defines Likert Scale as an ordinal psychometric measurement of attitudes, beliefs and opinions. For each statement presented, the respondent must indicate a degree of agreement or disagreement. Consequently, this study applied Likert Scale in a purpose to elicit important focus needed and to be easily understood by the participants. Likert Scale requested the participants to give positive or negative responses in a certain degree to the statements given. It is easily done as the participants do not have to provide answers to support their response. Nineteen statements were given with the focus on using observation to test oral abilities among primary school pupils. One open ended question was also given to identify which of the testing methods is the most preferred among the teachers to be used in assessing the pupils' speaking abilities. The items were constructed to obtain the teachers' views in regards to the use of the observation method and to know the teachers' preferences in testing speaking abilities.

### 4. Result

A set of questionnaire was posed in order to get feedback from the primary school teachers. The first three questions inquire the difficulties on assessing students speaking skills and the preferred methods used to assess speaking skills by the teachers. From the data, more than a half of the teachers agreed that it is difficult to assess students' speaking skills and they find observation method is the most convenient method for them to assess their students speaking skills. Observation is a method where it is just not looking but it also involves listening and note taking in an objective manner. We can observe students either formally or informally. Observation, often called "kid watching" and it is the second major method teachers use to collect assessment data about students instruction and learning. (Arisian, 2001). Observation involves watching or listening to pupils carry out some activity which is the observation process or making a judgment on pupils on what they have produced. The primary school teachers tend to choose this method as they are able to evaluate student's communicative competence individually.

According to the data, from the questionnaire, the teachers were prompted on a proper guideline on how to use the observation method adequately. Majorities of the respondents have gone through enough training in assessing student's speaking skills using observation method. Besides, the teachers declared that they have adequate effective and efficient instrument in carrying out the speaking test through observation. An observation is watching and listening to students with the clear intention of studying a particular behavior or ability or answering a very specific question. Most of the observation will have a focus; it is carried out systematically with the clear intention of understanding the students. This includes their behavior and learning, such as skills and knowledge, interests and thought processes, social interactions and attitude to learning. "It involves note taking, probably using a particular recording method and can be diagnostic tool as it provides information for reflection, analysis and discussion." (Duncan, 2008 : 46-47).

Some of the teachers are also able to elicit errors and correct their student's utterances when they speak in the class. Not only that, the teachers also prepared themselves with a well-planned lesson when conducting observation to test speaking skills among the students.

In implementing the test, teachers should brief students on the mechanisms of the oral test and the test should be fair to all students (Arshad et.al., 2002) Observation also enables the teachers to make decisions on how to support the students learning by adding resources or taking away redundant resources and also deciding what questions to ask. It is important to have well-planned lesson so that the teacher will have some sort of guidance and to make the evaluation valid and meaningful. Observation gives the opportunity to identify the changes in behavior in students and to ensure the teachers to set a realistic goal in planning their curriculum. It also informs planning and intervention by directing the teacher's attention to the children's strengths and needs and how they operate in the learning environment. Observation also provides both realistic and more accurate view of student's behavior during the learning process. It gives the teachers some feedback on the effectiveness of resources and the learning environment as well.

In order to conduct a speaking assessment task, the teachers should instill confidence in them to carry out this method. Thus, several teachers admit that they have a strong confidence in them while carrying out the observation. The teachers are aware of the challenges that they might meet during the observation evaluation. They are firm with the scoring and avoiding themselves being judgmental during the assessment. Usually the teachers will be more proficient after they have developed their skills in conducting the observations. Sometimes there are some things that the students do or say that are not part in the learning process and yet may reflect significant learning and development. Observation method in assessing speaking skill often be carried out in an authentic situation. Therefore, the teachers should be able to be vigilant naturally in order to identify errors in the classroom. Observation is about noticing these things, thinking and reflecting on them and making connections. It may involve informal recording that allows the teachers to quickly record the moments, this involves being continually alert and paying attention. (Lockwood, 2008).

According to the teachers, they find it easy to conduct the speaking tasks in groups. This is because, it is easier to the teachers to observe the pupils, identify the errors and evaluate their speaking abilities. Observation involves watching or listening to pupils carry out some activity which is the observation process or making a judgment on pupils on what they have produced. Both formal and informal teacher observations are important information gathering techniques in classrooms (McKinley, 1999). Observation also ensures that some students do not dominate in a task given and that more reticent students become more involved in them. Not only that, through group activities, opportunities identified for engaging a student sustained shared thinking. There are many key things to observe children and the most vital is their attitudes to learning and level of engagement and involvement in a particular play activity. Here the teachers need to be aware of their students' cooperation and collaboration in the learning process.

In addition, the teachers discover that it is important to carry out one to one method in assessing speaking skills at least once a year. However, most of the teachers prefer observations task in carrying out a speaking assessment because it comprises all the skills to achieve communicative competence. Observation is very important as it will make the teachers understand more on the children and their learning in the educational context. Observation also develops a systematic approach for using observational information to plan future steps in the student's developmental and learning process. Teachers must be aware that through a careful observation and interaction with children that we can get a true picture due to the authenticity of the test.

The teachers who conduct the observation method in assessing speaking skills should take into account on all the suggestions stated above. It is essential to ensure that the number of the students in the class should be in a small scale to make the observation method more effective. In addition, fun and gregarious activities which involves active participation from the students leads to effective assessment.

Table 1: Suggestions by the teachers on the ways to enhance the implementation of observation method in assessing speaking skill among primary pupils.

#### Suggestions:

1) Reduce the number of students in class.

#### Reasons:

To focus more on identifying errors and assist the students by giving more opportunities for them to participate in the task given .

2) Carry out fun activities which involve all the students.

To encourage the students to participate and to boost motivation for them to participate actively during the activities.

3) Conduct a debate, songs and poem recitation in classroom to observe the students.

To boost confidence and eliminate shyness among the students .

4) Tasks should be focused on topics that all students are familiar with.

To encourage the students to speak and communicate with each other.

## 5. Recommendation

The study findings provide some useful recommendations to English teachers in schools for future reference:

### 5.1. Meaningful Observations

The first recommendation calls for teachers' role as the assessor. As an assessor, teachers have to describe how well the students are performing. In line with this role, a strong theoretical framework of assessment should be acquired by teachers as it has a strong

impact on the teachers' ways of observing, interpreting and evaluating the learners' performance. With this understanding, teachers can develop practical recording skills of specificity, directness, mood and completeness that help teachers to produce clear observations and detailed analysis (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2014). Therefore, the move beyond descriptive report to detailed analysis made by teacher could only be achieved through meaningful observation. The quality and clarity of the meaningful observation is crucial because teachers' capacity to engage in critical self-reflection relies on the rich detail of the observation. Through critical self-reflection, teachers review their ways of observing and create new possibilities for and understanding student's learning and reviewing their teaching practices. This clearly demonstrates the value of having a meaningful observation in assessing students' speaking skill.

### 5.2. Observation Checklist

The second recommendation is pertaining to the use of observation checklist during assessment. In Malaysian classroom, speaking tasks are almost never being recorded and transcribed for informal assessment purpose. Observations which go unrecorded in some way will not be as easily defensible to students, parents, and administrators, and may be forgotten over time (O'Sullivan et al., 2002). For that reason, this checklist enables language samples elicited by the task to be scanned for these functions in real time, without resorting to the laborious and somewhat limited analysis of transcripts. Checklist could be utilized in variety of setting; either during a single activity or during routine classroom activities. Perhaps, the most valuable contribution that checklist offers is its potential to improve the quality of speaking assessment in both low-stakes and high-stakes contexts. Checklists can be used for formative assessment to monitor students' behavior and progress towards reaching stated goals. By offering teachers an instrument that can be used in real time, the checklists have all its practicality to be used in Malaysian classroom setting.

### 5.3. Small-Scale Classroom

One of the dilemmas in Malaysian classroom is the large-scale number of students. . A classroom usually comprises of at least thirty to forty students in a common primary school in Malaysia. With that number of students, the observations made by teachers may not necessarily provide sufficient reliability. Perhaps teachers are uncomfortable in giving grade to students when the number of students is high. Looking at these considerations, an ideal speaking assessment should take into account the number of students to be assessed. Small classes can therefore allow teachers to engage in more individualized teaching and effective observation (Jannah et al., 2013). Hence, teachers must be given the necessary support to be able to adequately fulfill their evaluative role and the small-scale could be seen as one of these supports. It would seem that the trajectory that assessment is currently following in our educational system is not headed in the right direction if this setback is not solved. It is also recognized, as Galton (1998) has pointed out, that we do not have a lot of knowledge about effects of class size on teaching on which to base practical advice and build coherent pedagogies. If we are serious about implementing a more individualized pedagogy and effective assessment then we need to think through ways in which we can maximize opportunities for individual attention, in the context of changing classroom contexts.

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