

Title: Innovative school-based English Language assessment practices in Singapore

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Abstract

This paper presents the key findings of a doctoral research project which examined how teachers interpreted and managed their English Language (EL) assessment practices under a distinctive policy innovation in Singapore – the Integrated Programmes (IP), which de-emphasises examinations and encourages greater teacher autonomy to broaden students' learning. More specifically, the paper describes how teachers worked collaboratively as a school-based community to expand their assessment practices to promote EL learning, and shows that innovative school-based assessment is possible in a supportive context such as the IP, even as the larger educational system is still dominantly influenced by centralised external authorities. The implication of this finding for mainstream schools is also discussed in this paper.

The data for this study were collected from two schools. The primary data comprised semi-structured in-depth interviews with eight teacher-participants and was supplemented by 'stimulated recall' of the marking of essays, lesson observations, and document analysis. These methods provided an understanding of teacher-based EL assessment practices from the teacher-participants' own viewpoints and facilitated the corroboration of the interpretive reality presented by the teacher-participants. The inductive data analysis involved codifying and categorising the interview data, and comparing them with the whole data set using a continual comparison method.

Introduction

This paper draws on the findings of a doctoral research study (Sellan, 2012) which examines how teachers interpret and manage their English Language (EL) assessment practices to broaden their students' language learning under a distinctive policy innovation in Singapore. The policy innovation, referred to as the Integrated Programmes (IP), is designed to de-emphasise the influence of national examinations and encourage teacher-based practices to enhance the learning of highly able students.

While the doctoral research study illuminates how teachers expand their assessment practices to broaden students' EL learning by providing insights into the nature, level of complexity and processes of the expansion, this paper focuses specifically on the findings related to how teachers function as a school-based EL assessment community to enable the expansion.

Research gap

While educational research claims a tradition of conceptualising assessment as an instrument that provides evidence of student learning (Moss, Pullin, Gee, Haertel, & Young, 2008), inadequate attention has been paid to understanding how teachers interpret and manage their

assessment practices – a growing concern in the field of educational assessment, including EL assessment (Davison, 2004). Consequently, the doctoral research study addressed this research gap to examine how the assessment process unfolds with regard to teacher-based EL assessment in both conceptual (interpretation) and practical (management) terms from the viewpoint of teachers themselves.

Research context

Singapore’s classroom practices have been influenced by the dominant presence of national examinations such as the GCE Ordinary Level (O-Level) examination (Koh & Luke, 2009; Kramer-Dahl, 2008a, 2008b; Cheah, 1998). To achieve academic success for their students and schools in a highly competitive and selective society, teachers in general have traditionally seen it as their responsibility to follow closely the external, standardised assessment framework of these examinations and to focus on strong rehearsals for them.

The research context of this study, the policy innovation of the IP, seeks to de-emphasise examinations and encourage teacher-based assessment practices to broaden the learning of highly able students (the top ten percent of the cohort). As shown in Figure 1, which compares the IP in the two participating schools with the programme in mainstream schools, the de-emphasising of examinations in the IP is seen in the removal of the Year 10 O-Level national examination, which continues to serve as the gatekeeping examination for students in mainstream schools in Singapore to progress to junior college and polytechnics.

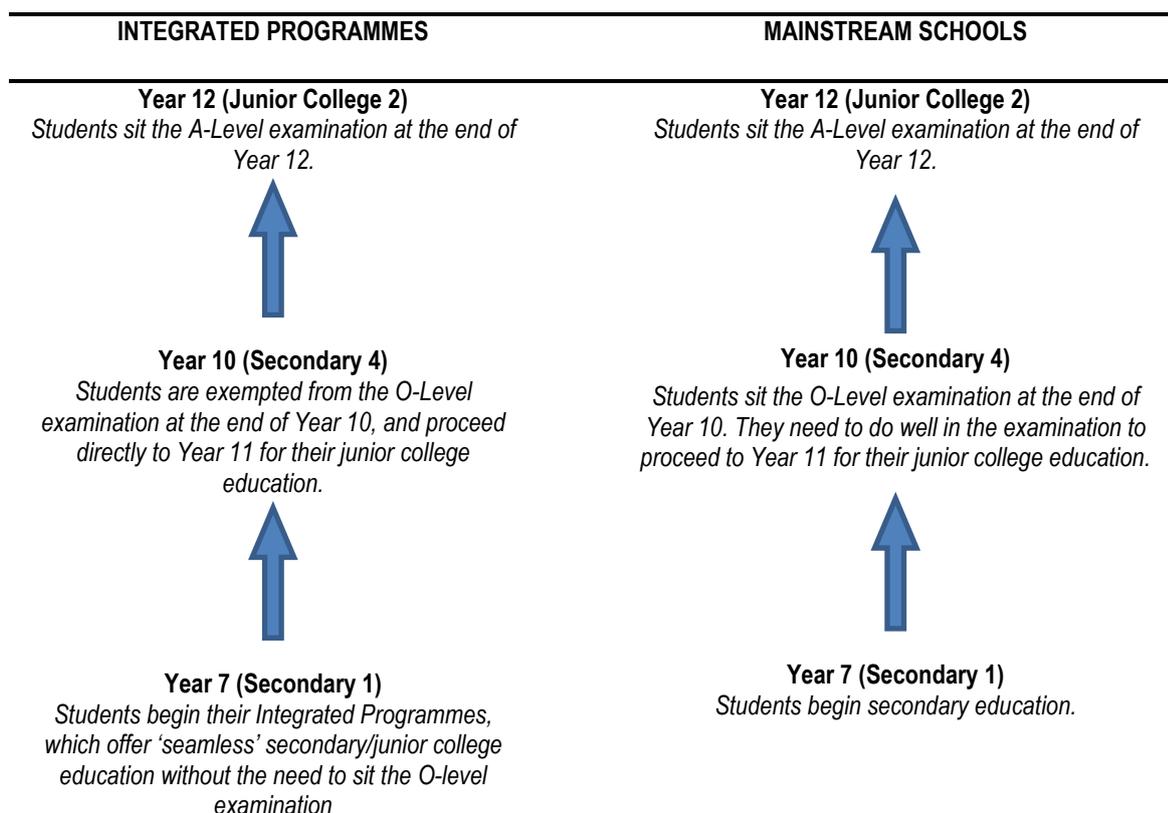


Figure 1 Comparison of the IP in the two participating schools with mainstream schools

Removing the requirement of the O-Level examination in the IP is a deliberate attempt by the Ministry of Education, Singapore to mitigate the influence of the dominant examination culture in Singapore and to provide a high level of systemic support and autonomy for their teachers to rework assessment practices to achieve the primary goal of promoting broad

educational outcomes such as independent and less structured learning, and leadership, rather than just success in examinations (Kang, 2005).

The choice of the IP as the research context for this study provided the opportunity to gather data which exemplify teachers' interpretation and management of EL assessment practices as they start to move away from standardised examination-driven assessment, and offered the potential to bring sharpness to the data needed to illuminate the research focus and render the significant issues more visible.

Two IP schools participated in this study. The participating schools belong to the family school model of the IP, where a secondary school is affiliated to a partner high school and a partner junior college, and all secondary students are assured of a place in the affiliated junior college as soon as they begin the IP in Year 7 (Secondary 1).

Methodology

As the purpose of the study was to achieve a deep understanding of teachers' perspectives of their interpretation and management of assessment practices, an interpretive research approach was used to understand the conceptual and practical aspects of assessment practices from the point of view of the teacher- participants themselves, and a 'collective case study' (Creswell, 2007, Stake, 2000) was designed to examine the professional experiences of eight teacher-participants, who were the cases in the study.

The primary data was obtained through semi-structured interviews with the teacher-participants at the beginning, middle and end of the 2009 school year. This data was supplemented and corroborated by the stimulated recall of essay marking, lesson observations, and analysis of assessment, instructional, curricular and policy documents. These four methods allowed for a deep understanding of teacher-based EL assessment practices from the teachers' viewpoints and, simultaneously, facilitated an in-built corroboration of the interpretive reality presented by the teacher-participants.

The inductive analysis of the data involved codifying and categorising the interview data and comparing them with the whole data set using a continual comparison method that included repeated readings of teacher-participants' responses (Lalik & Potts, 2001) and strategies to see what the data were telling the researcher at a larger level (Shank, 2006).

Discussion

The broader findings of the doctoral research study showed a significant expansion of teacher-based EL assessment practices to increase students' learning in the discipline. In other words, within the policy context of the IP that seeks to de-emphasise external examinations and facilitate teacher autonomy, there was the recurrent leitmotif of teacher-participants' conceptualising and implementing creative and divergent assessment practices to increase their students' EL capability, as compared to the practices in mainstream schools which stayed close to the assessment formats, processes and standards related to national examinations. As mentioned in the introduction, this paper focuses on how teachers in each participating IP school functioned as a school-based EL assessment community to enable the expansion in assessment practices.

Strong collaboration and consensus in each school

The finding that teacher-based EL assessment in the IP has taken on a school-based direction is seen in the strong collaboration and consensus that emerged in the assessment practices within each participating school. In fact, this collaboration and consensus among teachers in a specific school is critical to their expansion in EL assessment practices as school-based ways of reframing their assessment roles, expanding assessment constructs, increasing the range of assessment procedures, and reconsidering assessment standards began to gradually compete with and supplant practices affiliated to external centralised examinations.

Although there is evidence of collaboration and shared learning among teachers across the levels within the EL department in the participating schools at select points, the collaboration and shared learning are most strongly evident among teachers in the immediate work group – that is, those teaching the same subject at the specific level, an observation shared by Stiggins and Dufour (2009). The collaboration and shared learning are most evident during (but not limited to) their weekly professional sharing time, which provides them the sustained opportunity to engage in the development of curriculum and assessment materials, check on how things are playing out in their respective classrooms, seek clarification, and work through any uncertainties.

Distinctive way of expanding constructs in each school

One example of the school-based approach is seen in how the two participating schools interpret the EL learning and assessment constructs differently from each other. Moreover, even within each school, teachers adapt the constructs differently for groups of learners who vary in their academic ability and interests, and, consequently, adopt different elicitation and judging procedures. While the absence of a common understanding of the learning and assessment constructs for EL has been noted in the research field (Bachman, 2008; Ross, 2008), what this example illustrates is that it is important to allow teachers to exercise flexibility in focusing on specific learning and assessment constructs to enhance their students' learning according to the teachers' knowledge of the particular learners and their particular contexts of learning.

In this study, different interpretations of the inclusion of literature or philosophy into the EL curriculum and assessment frameworks are instances of such tailoring of constructs to different groups of learners. The fact that the teacher-participants demonstrate the need to tailor constructs to the needs of different groups of IP students even within the same school suggests the need for teachers in mainstream schools everywhere (where there is a much broader range of student ability) to move in this direction – a point suggested by Wiliam (2010) as well when dealing with significantly different groups of students.

Distinctive way of harnessing the two assessment cultures in each school

Another example of the school-based approach is seen in the distinctive ways in which the teacher-participants in each participating school harnessed the two assessment cultures – 'assessment of learning' and 'assessment for learning' – to meet the accountability needs of the system and the learning needs of students respectively. This difference is evident, for example, in how each school conceived of the formal assessment framework for their students, including the place of formative assessment in the framework.

Distinctiveness from partner high school

What sharpens the distinctiveness of each participating school is seen in the fact that the assessment practices in each school are significantly different even from their respective partner high schools in the family school model, and that these differences persist even

despite the opportunity and the obligation for the partner schools to work together. The distinctive identity of each school is therefore seen to be orchestrated through the shared beliefs, knowledge and experiences of the teachers in each school as well as the concord that emerges from their close professional collaboration within the school at all stages of the assessment cycle: conceptualising, eliciting, judging and validating (Scarino, 2009; Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009).

Enhanced teacher professionalism

The form of school-based assessment revealed in this study is dependent on teacher-activists who help

schools deepen their capacity by moving beyond a world in which those who think and plan are separated from those who teach and do the work (Darling Hammond, 2005, p. 385).

It needs to be distinguished in kind from the more traditional forms of school-based assessment practices related to national examinations, where an external assessment authority mandates the assessment tasks and procedures, and moderates the results. In such assessments, the role of the teacher-assessors is 'procedural compliance' (Hume & Coll, 2009, p. 270) to carry out the stipulated requirements of the external examination authority rather than reconsider assessment practices in a fundamental way.

Concluding note to this section

This section has presented the findings on the distinctive school-based assessment approaches taken by the two participating schools. It must be noted that the teachers in the two participating schools are well-placed within the Singapore educational system to expand their EL assessment practices, as they belong to a small number of popular independent IP schools which provide the greatest degree of teacher-autonomy and, consequently, maximum curriculum and assessment space in the country.

Notwithstanding this institutional latitude, one could not have anticipated their school-based direction but only theorised a spectrum of scenarios in the absence of an empirical study such as this. For instance, teachers might not have chosen to use their autonomy in any significant way and carried on with existing assessment practices, or each teacher could have used this autonomy to work independently of his or her school colleagues. Alternatively, teachers could have developed identical assessment practices as their counterparts in their partner high school, or, at the extreme end of this spectrum, they could have chosen to work as an elite cluster with all IP schools, adopting common assessment practices – in other words, forming a 'premier' educational league of their own.

The next section discusses the implication of these findings for teachers in contexts other than the IP.

Implication

The preceding section showed that teacher-participants functioned as an assessment community within their discipline and engaged with assessment issues in a collaborative and conceptual way to expand their students' capability in the discipline. Notwithstanding this positive finding on school-based assessment, it must be acknowledged that the context of the IP is a distinctive one, supported by increased teacher autonomy and dedicated resources, and implemented with a safety net as the students in the IP belong to the top ten percent of the cohort and are given guaranteed admission into junior college. The question remains as to

whether school-based assessment can assume an increased profile in mainstream schools in Singapore as well as in other educational contexts, which may not have a similar supportive policy design.

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