Assessment for learning practices among Malay language teachers in Malaysia National Type Chinese School

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Article Info

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the issues Malay language teachers in Malaysia National Types Chinese School (SJKC) regarding the inconsistent application assessment for learning (AfL) practices, the persistence of traditional teacher-centered, and the challenge of aligning AfL practices with curriculum standards and assessment criteria. These issues have a critical impact on the effectiveness of assessment, teaching, and learning. Given AfL's potential to address educational challenges and enhance student outcomes, this study is highly relevant. To achieve this goal, a qualitative case study design approach, six participants were selected using the following criteria in purposive sampling, using data gathered from in-depth semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, lesson plans and assessment methods. Thematic analysis conducted using Atlas.ti, revealed three main themes: knowledge of AfL, AfL practice, and obstacles and challenges. The results show that most teachers primarily use belief AfL to improve student outcomes, but there are significant differences between beliefs and practices. Moreover, lack of knowledge which poses challenges due to shifts in curriculum standards and assessment administration in school. Given the results, suggestions embedding AfL principle into AfL practices to develop an objective framework for AfL and tracking second language learners' language proficiency and progress, improving learning outcomes and language acquisition.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Recently teachers worked to enhance students' outcomes [1] by implementing effective assessment for learning (AfL) also known as formative assessment in educational assessment [2]. Black and William [3] discovered that embedding assessments into classroom activities might improve learning outcomes and promote student academic achievement [4]. This scenario is a widely studies practice of AfL is crucial in promoting students' learning advancement. Hence, teachers need to distinguish between assessment as learning (AaL), assessment of learning (AoL), and AfL to create suitable assessment activities that facilitate successful learning outcomes [5]. Mostly, previous studies said AfL is a complex implementation [4]. AfL serves several purposes, but it can be challenging to put into practice due to its complexity [6]. Progress occurs when students are aware of what they must do to enhance their learning, have a clear understanding of it, and are allowed the time to make the required adjustments to improve their learning journey [3]. This concept aligns with the latest developments in educational assessment research [7]. AfL involves identifying and diagnosing students'

learning needs to support continuous improvement throughout the learning process. Therefore, teachers need to have a strong understanding of assessment to improve classroom instruction and student outcomes [8]. Teachers should prioritize gaining knowledge and expertise in AfL because students' outcome is evaluated through assessment tasks [9]. Furthermore, teachers' assessment literacy includes a focus on their knowledge of assessment, assessment methods used, and the feedback they provide on classroom assessment tasks [10]. Teachers are required to understand different assessment methods, including evaluating learning and supporting learning, to use effective assessment strategies that can enhance future learning outcomes [11].

Research by Wang *et al.* [12] revealed significant differences between beliefs and assessment practices. A teacher's regular practice of AoL was more common than AfL. For example, a writing task used summative judgments regarding writing performance based on marks in rubrics [12]. There is a deeply rooted culture of traditional assessment practices, in which success is measured by grades and test scores. This culture can create resistance to adopting AfL practices, which may be perceived as less rigorous or objective. In other studies, Schut *et al.* [13] showed that teachers perceive programmatic assessment as beneficial. They also acknowledge the implications of assessment practices on their professional performance [13] and differences in enactment by teachers explain a main part of the differences in effect large class sizes, time, insufficient transparency in assessment, and internal and external summative assessment issues on student learning [14]. Due to its comprehensive approach, which integrates multiple assessments over time to provide a more holistic assessment of student learning. These implications include increased workload and potential stress, which can affect their teaching efficacy and job satisfaction. Additionally, there is a disconnect between teachers' beliefs that AfL is time-consuming and challenging to apply, and the beneficial impact these principles have on students' learning [15].

Research by Kleij *et al.* [16] reported that feedback perceptions and feedback effectiveness are contexts-, subject-, and individual-dependent. The key findings indicate that students needed help to identify quite a bit of the feedback provided by their teachers. Furthermore, even when they did recognize the input, it could have been more frequently interpreted in the way the teacher intended it. In mathematics, the understanding and perception of feedback were more frequent and aligned with its intended use than in English [16]. Assessment feedback is an important aspect of teacher assessment literacy, which can be understood in three interrelated dimensions: conceptual in terms of conceptions teachers have of feedback, pragmatic regarding feedback practice, and socio-emotional, which relates to how teachers attend to the emotional dynamics of assessment from the student's perspective [17]. Additionally, measures to reduce language-related interference are crucial to minimize construct-irrelevant variance and ensure that feedback is accurately understood and utilized by students [18].

Teachers need a holistic understanding of feedback that goes beyond just providing comments. They must consider the theoretical underpinnings of feedback, implement effective AfL practices, and be attuned to students' emotional responses. Developing comprehensive competencies is challenging but essential for effective feedback [17]. Language plays a crucial role in how feedback is conveyed and understood. Differences in language proficiency, terminology, and cultural contexts can create barriers to effective communication, leading to misunderstandings and less effective feedback [19]. To address this study, focus on AfL practices is essential, such as the AfL five principles which are: i) sharing learning goals with students; ii) helping students understand the standard they were working toward; iii) involving students in assessment (peer to peer and self-assessment); iv) teachers providing feedback that helps; and v) creating a supportive classroom culture where mistake is a natural part of learning and where can improve [20].

It is crucial to thoroughly explore the AfL practices of Malay language as a second language (L2) [21] among teachers in Malaysia National Types Chinese School (SJKC) to gain a deeper understanding of the subject [22]. Therefore, this study's objective was to investigate Malay language teachers in SJKC use AfL practices in the classroom. To achieve this goal, two research questions were formulated to guide the study:
- How is the implementation assessment of learning practices for Malay language teachers in the context of classroom-based assessment?
- What potential obstacles and challenges could arise during the implementation of AfL in the context of classroom-based assessment?

Moreover, the research results will show the implementation and understanding of AfL practice in the Malay language at SJKC, as well as address obstacles and challenges in the assessment classroom.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS AND THEORIES ON AFL PRACTICE

Multiple theories, models, and conceptual frameworks have been utilized to study AfL with a focus on student-centered learning [23]. This research based on systematically outlines the model of AfL by Black and William [24], [25] and conceptual frameworks of constructivist and social constructivist theories by Vygotsky [26], [27] that can be used to assess and improve student outcome practices in line with the desired

goal [5]. In the moodel of AfL by Black and William [24], [25], teachers are required to gather data on both the learning progress of students and their teaching methods [10]; it is important to involve them in activities such as self- and peer-assessment, maintaining portfolios, engaging in conferencing, and participating in student-centered activities [28]. Gebremariam *et al.* [9] indicated Ethiopia's educational system, there are doubts about the effectiveness of teachers' AfL practices seem too questionable. More attention is being placed on the concept of feedback, emphasizing students being engaged participants rather than just passive receivers of information [29]. Emphasizing AfL can enhance the quality of learning results, the principles AfL involves applying within the conceptual frameworks of constructivist and social constructivist theories [26], [27].

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) [26], [27] highlights the importance of designing a curriculum that incorporates interactive elements and consideration for the environment. The teacher must know any implementation learning in school such as L2 acquisition in general and in learning the use of adverbs in particular [26], [27]. The potential challenges that have been identified in teachers' AfL impact their teaching to enhance students' long-term learning outcomes [30]. AfL serves two main purposes: first, to inform subject teachers and administrators about students' progress, and second, to give students immediate feedback on their learning so they can address any gaps in their understanding of the intended learning outcomes [31]. Models and conceptual frameworks play a crucial role in providing insight into cutting-edge exploration, as they connect the basic research process conceptually to the empirical insights revealed through findings [32]. This research highlights an objective framework for AfL practice to enhance their assessment effectiveness, particularly concerning implementing AfL.

3. METHOD

This study used a qualitative case study approach to investigate primary school teachers' practices and obstacles in implementing AfL [33]. Data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews [34], informal conversations [35], lesson plans, and assessment material [34]. The study was conducted with six Malay language teachers who were selected through purposive sampling, chosen based on their knowledge and experiences gained for at least one year of teaching Malay [34]. This sampling method was used to ensure rich information to help understand the phenomenon under investigation [34].

The participants comprised three teachers from urban schools and three from rural schools [34]. Each teacher was identified as participant 1 (P1), participant 2 (P2), participant 3 (P3), participant 4 (P4), participant 5 (P5), and participant 6 (P6) [34]. Interviews and casual conversations were recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis [36] to complement the teachers' assessment practices for student improvement and to understand the difficulties they encountered in their teaching [37]. Thematic analysis was conducted using Atlas.ti [38].

4. RESULTS AND DISSCUSION

This section presents the findings and analysis of the research on AfL practices among teachers in SJKC. This subsection is presented through theme analyses, which aim to address the research questions [34]. The result uncovers three main themes. The initial theme is "knowledge of AfL", the subsequent theme is "AfL practices", and the final theme is "obstructions and challenges."

4.1. Theme 1: knowledge of AfL

Most of the teachers demonstrated a basic understanding of the core concepts of AfL. They acknowledged AfL as a formative procedure to enhance student learning, rather than only assessing it. Teachers highlighted key aspects such as providing feedback, setting learning goals, and involving students in self-assessment. The teachers' understanding aligns with the theoretical framework of AfL [29]. However, the depth of their thoughts varied, with some teachers showing limited awareness of the broader implications of AfL for instructional planning and student engagement. Even, the question "What do teachers understand about education assessment?", one teacher provided the answer as:

> "*I don't understand about education assessment. The task involves assessing the type of objective test paper that has marks.*" (P3)

These responses highlight a lack of familiarity with the principles of AfL such as an inconsistency in its implementation. Nevertheless, more than half of the teachers evaluated their understanding and the purpose of their learning practices. For clarity, the following was the teachers' excerpts as:

"The assessment is conducted continuously throughout the PDPC period. Assessment is a learning process that includes the activities of analyzing, collecting, recording, scoring, and interpreting information about a student's learning for a purpose." (P2)

The teachers (P2) demonstrate a robust comprehension of AfL as an ongoing process integral to knowledge, emphasizing continuous assessment to pinpoint learning gaps and offer timely feedback [39]. P2 highlighted several challenges in implementing AfL practices, including time constraints, large class sizes, and cultural barriers. Despite a robust understanding of AfL, systemic issues hinder effective implementation, requiring targeted interventions and policy reforms to support teachers [40]. The investigation shows teachers' AfL knowledge and practice vary. Some teachers understand AfL's continual and formative nature, but others need professional development.

The inconsistency in knowledge and practice can hinder AfL's efficacy, as P3's responses reflect a summative assessment perspective. The issues mentioned by P2 also highlight the execution of strategy. Time restrictions and huge class sizes hinder AfL strategy implementation. Cultural differences may also affect teachers' assessment procedures. These strategies challenges must be addressed through specific interventions to improve AfL implementation. Professional development should increase instructors' understanding of AfL practices and offer practical solutions to recognized difficulties. Policy changes are needed to enable ongoing and formative assessment. Finally, teachers have a basic comprehension of AfL practices, but many gaps and obstacles remain. Effective AfL implementation requires thorough professional development and structural assistance to address these difficulties and improve student learning.

4.2. Theme 2: AfL practices

The data analysis reveals significant practices that contribute to a transparent, student-centered learning environment, supporting and motivating outcomes for all learners. Teachers said they must refer to curriculum standards to determine lesson goals, starting with reviewing specific learning objectives for their subject and level of performance. These standards offer a framework outlining what students are expected to know and achieve by the end of each lesson. Next, the Classroom Assessment Implementation Guidelines Booklet provides full information on these procedures to ensure teachers have a guide to implementing the assessment. Typically, teachers document their lesson plans and teaching objectives as their competencies for each lesson. Teachers share learning objectives with students before learning and teaching because of teacher beliefs. Here are some of the excerpts from the teacher:

"Before teaching and learning begin, I will share my learning objective therefore students will be more prepared and ready for any assessment." (P6)

The teachers (P6) acknowledge that adding the principle of AfL into AfL practice will enhance students' understanding of their learning progress before completing assessments [41]. The teacher mentioned his students would be more motivated.

Therefore, preparing teaching aids and assessment methods involves carefully selecting and designing resources that align with assessment standards [2]. This alignment ensures that teaching materials not only support the learning objectives but also facilitate the assessment of student's progress in meeting those objectives [42]. Effective teaching aids should be tailored to address the diverse needs of students, providing clear guidance on the expected outcomes and the means to achieve them [43]. By aligning teaching aids with assessment standards, teachers can create a more supportive learning environment that motivates students and provides clear benchmarks for their academic progress [44]. Here are some of the excerpts from the teacher:

"If necessary and suitable for teaching and learning, worksheets download from the internet." (P6)

Achieving learning objectives and ensuring meaningful and constructive assessments are both facilitated by this alignment, which eventually improves student outcomes [45]. Teachers used examples of student work that exemplified different achievement levels and used them as models to clarify learning objectives. Teachers enhance students' understanding of abstract goals by offering clear illustrations of different levels of accomplishment and providing concrete benchmarks for their work. Additionally, creating rubrics and checklists with explicit criteria for success helps students understand what is required to meet the standards. Here are some of the excerpts from the teachers:

"Grade A is between 80 to 100 marks, grade B between 60 to 79, grade C between 40 to 59, grade D between 20 to 39 and grade E between 10 to 19." (P4)
"Write praise comments like good and satisfactory and keep up the good work." (P6)

This approach not only increases student engagement and participation but also improves academic outcomes by making learning objectives more accessible and attainable [46].

Most of the students failed to acknowledge a significant portion of the feedback provided by their teachers [16]. In mathematics, feedback is more frequently acknowledged and interpreted as intended than in English, and if students do not receive or interpret feedback correctly, it is unlikely to effectively aid learning [16]. The effectiveness of feedback as a tool for enhancing student learning relies heavily on the student's ability to understand and act upon it [47]. The discrepancy in the acknowledgment of feedback between subjects, such as mathematics and English, suggests that the clarity and delivery of feedback may vary across disciplines [48]. In the field of mathematics, where feedback is typically more precise and focused on step-by-step instructions, students may find it simpler to comprehend and implement the given ideas. Conversely, feedback in subjects like the Malay language, which often involves more abstract and subjective aspects, may be harder for students to interpret and use effectively. One significant issue is the inconsistency in the application of assessment standards across different subjects and classrooms.

This inconsistency can lead to disparities in student understanding and performance, as some students may receive more precise and actionable feedback than others. Here are some of the excerpts from the teacher:

> "Students check their work after being checked by the teacher." (P6)
> "Provide space and opportunities for students to be actively involved such as expressing opinions and discussing with friends throughout teaching and learning." (P2)

Another issue is the challenge of effectively differentiating assessments to cater to the diverse learning needs of students [49]. While standardized assessments provide a uniform measure of achievement, they often fail to accommodate the varying abilities and learning styles within a classroom [49].

This can lead to certain students experiencing either a lack of stimulation or excessive stress, which in turn affects their level of involvement and academic advancement. Additionally, there is the concern of overemphasis on summative assessments at the expense of formative assessments. Summative assessments, such as final exams, often drive teaching practices and overshadow the formative assessments that provide ongoing feedback essential for student growth [49]. This focus can limit opportunities for students to improve through continuous feedback and iterative learning processes. In conclusion, while aligning teaching aids and assessment methods with standards significantly enhances student engagement and academic outcomes, several issues need addressing to optimize student assessment practices fully. To summarize, integrating teaching aids and assessment methods with standards greatly improves student involvement and academic achievements.

The next finding, create a supportive classroom culture where mistakes are a natural part of learning and where one can improve. Findings have shown that the beliefs and attitudes of teachers have a major effect on how mistakes are regarded in the classroom. When teachers consider errors as chances for acquiring knowledge, students are less likely to accept a viewpoint that emphasizes personal growth.

> "Indeed, it does. Highlighting the idea that mistakes are part of the learning process encourages students to see their abilities as improvable." (P6)
> "Yes, one of the main goals is a safe place to make errors and grow. It builds resilience and material knowledge." (P4)

Teachers P6 and P4 emphasize seeing mistakes as part of learning and establishing a supportive environment for progress. This aligns with Dweck's theory that a growth mindset matches teaching aids and assessment methods with standards to improve student involvement and academic performance, but various difficulties must be addressed to optimize student assessment [42]. Nevertheless, several unresolved difficulties must be addressed to fully optimize student assessment procedures. Changing kids' mindsets from fixed to progress can be difficult, especially if they have been taught to dislike mistakes. Teacher reinforcement and modeling of growth mindset behaviors are crucial [47]. Teachers' tolerance for mistakes and efforts to establish a safe environment.

4.3. Theme 3: obstacles and challenges

The formative assessment cycle includes five phases: defining expectations, eliciting responses, assessing and interpreting answers, communicating about responses, and changing teaching and learning [42]. One significant obstacle identified is the need for teachers to thoroughly understand and communicate the fundamental concepts of the curriculum and assessment standards to students.

> "Need to first understand the basic concepts in the curriculum and assessment standard documents before planning appropriate teaching methods to achieve the set objectives." (P4)

A major challenge is ensuring that teachers understand the curriculum and assessment criteria, which is necessary for effective classroom preparation and execution. Teachers stressed the importance of understanding these principles to meet educational goals [50]. Next finding, teacher perceptions, especially summative and formative assessment interpretations, are crucial to understanding classroom dynamics and pedagogical success.

One important result is that teachers commonly judge student learning and instructional success by both sorts of assessments. Here are some of the excerpts from the teacher:

"*More often use the method of observation instruments because of the many work constraints.*" (P1)

Teachers delight in shifted assessment approaches, but time and resource constraints limit their choices. There were implications for classroom dynamics being workload constraints whereas teachers' preference for observation instruments highlights their struggles to balance thorough assessments with professional responsibilities [50]. The reliance on observation instruments suggests that other potentially valuable assessment methods might be underutilized. Professional development and training could help teachers integrate a more balanced mix of assessment types, thereby enriching their pedagogical approach and providing a more holistic view of student learning [40]. Understanding student needs and personalizing training requires effective assessment strategies. Moreover, there is a need for balanced assessment strategies and the implementation of differentiated instruction techniques to accommodate diverse learning needs.

5. CONCLUSION

This study analyses the implementation of AfL practices among Malay language teachers of SJKC, concentrating on three key themes: knowledge of AfL, AfL practices, and the obstacles and problems faced by teachers. The results demonstrate an enormous gap between teacher opinions about the effectiveness of AfL and their actual classroom practices. While teachers recognize the potential of AfL to boost student outcomes. Teachers require a comprehensive understanding of assessment methods and feedback mechanisms to enhance student performance. Their implementation is limited by a lack of a thorough understanding of AfL principles, time constraints due to ongoing curriculum modifications, and the difficulties of assessment administration. Understanding the perspectives of teachers positively promotes the shift towards more effective assessments in education, despite the obstacles and possibility for teacher burnout. The study shows the need to overcome these difficulties to fully reap the benefits of AfL.

The study contributes to the current body of knowledge on AfL practices by providing empirical information on the views and practices of Malay language among teachers in SJKC. There is a lot of potential for the future in terms of sharing knowledge and continuously adopting AfL practices with greater emphasis on enhancing writing, reading, speaking, and listening skills. This study underlines the requirement for infusing AfL concepts into classroom activities to build an objective and coherent framework for AfL. It also represents tracking second language learners' language competency and growth to improve learning outcomes and language acquisition. By addressing the highlighted problems and focusing on professional development, teachers may improve their assessment literacy, ultimately leading to greater student performance and engagement in learning.

The study acknowledges several limitations, such as a small sample size, reliance on self-reported data, lack of longitudinal data, focus only on teachers' perspectives, and specific contextual constraints, which restrict generalizability. To overcome these limitations, future research should consider enlarging the sample size, utilizing mixed methods of assessment, conducting longitudinal studies, including student perspectives, and exploring the impact of professional development. It is also recommended to delve into contextual factors and develop interventions to address identified challenges. By addressing these areas, more comprehensive insights into AfL practices can be gained, enhancing teachers' assessment knowledge, and ultimately improving student performance and engagement. Future studies should explore AfL practices in SJKC other region to support teachers teaching in overcoming these challenges and effectively implementing AfL into their teaching strategies.

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